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A Qualitative Analysis of Fourth Grade Teachers' Perceptions of the Impact of the New Jersey Ask4 Testing on Instructional and Assessment Practices

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A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF FOURTH GRADE TEACHERS'
PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACT OF THE NEW JERSEY ASK4 TESTING ON
INSTRUCTIONAL AND ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

BY

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirement for the Degree
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I would like to acknowledge the following people for their help and guidance throughout this process. First and foremost I'd like to thank my husband Michael. His endless hours of proofreading truly made this document something to be proud of. He was there to take care of the house and the children as I sat endlessly researching and writing. Thank you for allowing me to fulfill my dream and making me feel confident that I could achieve it.

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DEDICATION

Twenty-three years ago I had a one year old baby, a high school diploma, and no way to support myself. I didn't know how I was going to financially take care of myself or my child. The only solution I came up with was to get an education. Through several degrees, a marriage, a job, the birth of twins, a lot of hard work, and all the other things that life throws your way, I've finally reached the pinnacle of that education. I hope that my journey may be an inspiration to other young women to follow their dreams and to never give up. We all have the ability to improve our life, we just have to take the initial step and have the persistence to follow it through until it becomes a reality.

I'd like to dedicate this dissertation to my husband Michael; to my children Daniel, Michael, and Christina; to my sister Michelle; and to my parents Barbara and Tony for helping me to achieve this goal that I set for myself a very long time ago. It is through their love and devotion that I never gave up.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
DEDICATION.....	vi
LIST OF TABLES.....	ix
LIST OF FIGURES.....	x
CHAPTERS	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
The Problem.....	1
Significance of the Study.....	4
Purpose of the Study.....	7
Guiding Questions.....	9
Delimitations and Limitations of the Study.....	10
Definition of Terms.....	10
Organization of the Study.....	12
II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE.....	14
Introduction.....	14
Related Literature.....	20
External Influences.....	20
Test Preparation.....	23
Content and Mode of Instruction.....	25
Assessment Strategies.....	27
Use and Reporting of Test Results.....	29
Conclusion.....	31
III. METHODOLOGY.....	34
Introduction.....	34
Population.....	37
Instrument Design.....	39
Research Procedures and Techniques for Data Collection.....	46
Background Information on Participants.....	48
Jury of Experts.....	49
Data Collection.....	50
Data Analysis.....	50
Summary.....	52

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS.....	53
Introduction.....	53
Analysis of Discussions.....	54
Research Question 1.....	54
Research Question 2.....	64
Research Question 3.....	70
Research Question 4.....	73
Research Question 5.....	78
Analysis of Qualitative Research.....	79
V. SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	81
Introduction.....	81
Summary of Study.....	82
Research Question 1.....	82
Research Question 2.....	87
Research Question 3.....	91
Research Question 4.....	93
Research Question 5.....	99
Conclusion.....	102
Recommendations for Policy, Practice and Future Research.....	104
Recommendations for Policy.....	104
Recommendations for Practice.....	106
Recommendations for Future Research.....	107
Concluding Remarks.....	108
REFERENCES.....	109
APPENDICES.....	118
A. Question Route.....	118
B. Transcripts of Interviews.....	124
District 1.....	125
District 2.....	170
District 3.....	211
C. Superintendent Letter.....	259
D. Principal Letter.....	262
E. Letter of Intent and Solicitation.....	265
F. Informed Consent.....	268

LIST OF TABLES

1	Research Question 1.....	41
2	Research Question 2.....	42
3	Research Question 3.....	43
4	Research Question 4.....	44
5	Research Question 5.....	45
6	Demographics of Subjects – Total Years Teaching.....	49
7	Demographics of Subjects – Total Years Teaching Fourth Grade.....	49

LIST OF FIGURES

1	Analysis of Research Question 1.....	83
2	Analysis of Research Question 2.....	88
3	Analysis of Research Question 3.....	92
4	Analysis of Research Question 4.....	94
5	Analysis of Research Question 5.....	100
6	An Analysis of the Impact of the New Jersey ASK4 Testing on Instructional and Assessment Practices of Fourth Grade Teachers.....	103

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Problem

The people of the United States need to know that individuals in our society who do not possess the levels of skill, literacy, and training essential to this new era will be effectively disenfranchised, not simply from the material rewards that accompany competent performance, but also from the chance to participate fully in our national life. A high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom.

A Nation at Risk, 1983

From the beginning of this nation, education has been a part of state government (Brimley and Garfield, 2005, p. 209). Historically, the federal government's role in education has been minor (Alexander & Alexander, 2005). Its function was to conduct research, disseminate information, and provide advisory assistance. They exercised interest in education without direct responsibility or control.

The writers of the Constitution avoided any specific designation of responsibility for formal education (Alexander & Alexander, 2005, pp. 62-97). Article 1, Section 8 gives Congress the authority to provide educational support.

Congress can involve itself in education only through indirect means and does not have the power to directly legislate change. Congress therefore has consistently used a categorical aid approach in order to bring about change.

The 10th amendment forms much of the legal basis for the nation's present system of education (Brimley and Garfield, 2005, p.173). The 10th amendment provides that "the powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people." Education has been and continues to be primarily a function of the state.

In today's educational environment, accountability and assessment have become a major focus (Polansky, 2000). Historically, the measurement movement stems back to the 1980's when educational reform was the buzzword. Reports were released that made the public perceive that public schools were not providing a quality education. The reports included The National Commission of Excellence's *Nation at Risk*; the Carnegie Foundation's *High School Study* and *Turning Point*; Goodland's *Study of Schooling* and *A Place Called School*;Sizer Horace's *Compromise*; Education Commission of the States' *Action for Excellence*; and Comer's *School Power*. The reports focused on student learning and performance. Many of the reports advocated curriculum revisions and increased student measures to assess student achievement. It was assumed that if they held schools accountable, students would learn. This generated the back-to-basics movement across the country.

The federal government's response was the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA), renamed and signed into law in January 2002, as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The centerpiece of the law is to identify schools that

are failing to meet the needs of its students (New Jersey Department of Education, 2004). Testing is the central theme of NCLB. The students are tested and results synthesized. Then schools are declared failing or in need of improvement. Local officials are granted more control, failing schools are held accountable, and all children are expected to read by third grade.

NCLB is based on four basic principles:

1. Stronger accountability for results
2. Increased flexibility and local control
3. Expanded options for parents
4. An emphasis on teaching methods that have proven to work

State and federal legislatures and governors maintain that the act redefines the federal role in K-12 education as a result of greater accountability (New Jersey Department of Education, 2004). This imposes control on state and local districts. Proponents declare it will help close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students with their peers.

In January of 2003, all the states filed their accountability plans to measure adequate yearly progress. The goal of NCLB is that through accountability, monitoring yearly progress, and developing effective programs, every student (100%) will achieve an acceptable or adequate proficiency level by 2014.

Under NCLB, every state was required to test students in grades 3 through 8 and 10 through 12 annually using state designed tests in reading and mathematics by the end of the 2005 – 2006 school year (Brimley & Garfield, 2005, Boehner & Castle, 2006). The test results determined if the schools made adequate yearly progress

(AYP). This is a measurement of the minimum level of improvement that states, school districts, and schools must achieve each year (No Child Left Behind, 2006). States had to also certify that all teachers of core academic subjects were highly qualified to teach using state-set definitions. But by the end of the 2007-2008 school year, states must additionally assess students once a year in science in grades 3-5, 6-9, and 10-12.

The accountability movement has gathered speed as the public demands increased and improved efficiency in the operation of public schools (Brimley and Garfield, 2005). The public wants objective proof that schools are achieving their objectives and tax revenues are being used efficiently. High-stakes testing is a politically charged issue that impacts the way our schools operate (Casbarro, 2005).

Significance of the Study

Nationally, NCLB changes the face of public education in a number of ways. It requires states to develop core curriculum content standards (CCCS) at each grade level and then design a test to measure the achievement of the CCCS (New Jersey Department of Education, 2004). These tests are accompanied by a reward and penalty structure for districts as a means of improving student achievement (National Education Association, 2004). Schools that do not meet “adequately yearly progress quotas” are placed on the NCLB school improvement list as required under federal law. In order to achieve AYP, schools must meet requirements across 40 indicators (New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association, 2006). Initial failure of a school to meet one of the 40 indicator categories puts that school on the “Early Warning” list. If the school fails to meet the standards for two or more years, it is placed on the

Schools in Need of Improvement (SINI) list. The sanctions for getting on the list are extensive. They range from a warning to reopening the school as a charter school. A school must meet AYP standards for two consecutive years to be removed from the school improvement list.

This is the first time in history that the federal government has had control over public education through NCLB. There are many organizations that feel that NCLB has effected education in negative ways. One such powerful organization is the National Education Association (NEA). A survey commissioned by NEA found that its members view NCLB negatively and want NEA to help revise the law which is due for reauthorization in 2007. NEA members feel that NCLB has not improved public education because of inadequate funding, punitive actions, and the reliance of standardized testing to measure student achievement. Reg Weave, President of NEA said,

The extensive focus on test scores as the only measure of student progress is forcing educators to teach to the test. Many school districts have deemphasized and, in some cases, even eliminated courses in the liberal arts, humanities, and performing arts. Our members are concerned about this trend, which is leading to the elimination of important subjects that provide students with a balanced education. (Education World, 2006)

The mission statement for the National Center for Fair and Open Testing (Fairtest, 2006) states that NCLB is a worthy goal for our nation, but legislation exacerbates the real problems in schools. Currently, student progress is gauged on performance in math and reading, therefore, schools will narrow instruction to what is

being tested. Students will be coached to pass the test instead of learning a rich curriculum. Most schools will be unable to meet the unrealistic goals set by the federal government. Schools serving low-income children will certainly “not pass” and successful schools that fail will be forced to drop what works for them. The sanctions meant for school improvement will do the opposite, pitting parents against teachers, schools against schools. Finally, the federal government hasn’t adequately funded the law making it difficult to implement especially in impoverished areas.

Neill, Guisbond, & Schaeffer (2004) criticize two assumptions made under NCLB. First, boosting test scores should not be the primary goal of schools. They feel that it leads to a one-size fits all teaching aimed at test preparation. This does not give children the high quality education they deserve. Second, schools cannot be improved by imposing harsh sanctions. Threats may get teachers and administrators to narrowly focus on boosting test scores. Narrowing exams and strong sanctions intensify teaching to the test. In its current form, NCLB is a punitive law that uses a test to label schools as failures and punishes them with sanctions.

Teaching to the test is a term with many meanings (Firestone, Schorr & Monfils, 2004). Generally speaking, it means that teachers are doing something special to help students do well on a test. Teachers have used decontextualized test preparations, where a special activity is done that loosely reflects regular instruction and focuses on the test itself. Many critics fear that the state tests will reinforce rote teaching methods.

On the ASK4, students spend about half their time answering multiple choice items and another half on answering short open-ended questions. The consensus

from researchers is that multiple choice formatted tests have a largely negative effect on instruction (Firestone, et. al., 2004). Teachers focus their curriculum on the content covered by the test. These tests reinforce teacher-centered didactic instruction.

Critics claim that the focus on reading and math has taken time away from other important subjects. School districts are aligning instruction more closely to what is being taught on the test and increasing instruction in reading and math to make sure students see material in class before they see it on the test. The Center of Education Policy confirmed in a study that 71% of districts reduced time in at least one other subject to make time for increased instructional time in reading and math (Smydo, 2006).

This researcher believes that teachers have altered the way they instruct and assess based on the testing and reporting requirements under NCLB. This research is important as the impact of NCLB will be felt at all elementary and intermediate grade levels as it reshapes the landscape of education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to analyze the impact of the New Jersey ASK4 testing on the instructional and assessment practices of fourth grade teachers to help policy makers, school leaders, and educators make well-informed decisions about accountability systems and their impact on instructional and assessment practices. The researcher focused specifically on New Jersey as all states have initiated different testing standards to assess the Core Curriculum Content Standards as directed under NCLB.

To comply with the directives under NCLB, New Jersey's fourth graders take the New Jersey Assessment Skills and Knowledge (NJASK4). The researcher focused on fourth grade teachers as this group has taken the ESPA's renamed the ASK4, the longest of any grade level in New Jersey.

The ASK4 is a criterion-referenced test. The criterion-referenced test's (CRTs) primary purpose is to determine the specific skill level of a student. It measures the specific skills students can master by the end of a grade being tested. Many states including New Jersey use CRTs to measure statewide curriculum effectiveness. In New Jersey these are stated in the Core Curriculum Content Standards (CCCS). The objectives provide guidance to the teachers on what students should learn and what they will be tested on. The teacher teaches toward measurable stated objectives.

With the reauthorization of NCLB expected in 2007, it is important to know how this mandate is impacting instructional and assessment practices of teachers. The researcher focused on fourth grade teachers in Bergen County working in schools with District Factor Groupings (DFG) of I or J districts. DFG's were developed for the purpose of comparing student performance on statewide assessments across similar demographical school districts. The DFGs represent an approximate measure of a districts socioeconomic status. They are useful when doing analysis of school districts because they share similar characteristics. Bergen County was chosen because it has the largest percentage of districts with DFGs of I and J (NJDOE, 2006).

Studies have continuously proven that socioeconomic status is a significant predictor of student achievement (Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001). Results have shown that the percentage of students in free/reduced-price lunch programs is related negatively to students' academic performance. Also, individual and family backgrounds are important influences on educational achievement (Okapala, Okapala, & Smith, 2001). Family income, having parents that attended college, a two parent household, and living in a community with a high social capital structure are all significant factors on student achievement.

This researcher focused on how teachers' instructional and assessment practices may be affected in districts in which socioeconomic influences are not a factor in academic performance. Therefore, districts were selected at the upper scale of socioeconomic status to eliminate this bias.

Guiding Questions

This research analyzed the impact the New Jersey ASK4 testing on the instructional and assessment practices of fourth grade teachers. The prime question that was addressed in the research was: How can using a high-stakes test, like the New Jersey ASK4, effect the instructional and assessment practices of fourth grade teachers? This is an explanatory research project that uses qualitative data from focus groups in the analysis. Subsidiary questions include:

1. How do fourth grade teachers perceive the NJ ASK4 as an effective assessment tool for fourth grade students?
2. How do fourth grade teachers perceive the NJ ASK4 as having an effect on their instructional methods?

3. How do fourth grade teachers perceive the NJ ASK4 as having an effect on their assessment practices?
4. Do fourth grade teachers perceive pressure from outside sources in preparing students for the NJ ASK4 test? If pressure is perceived, how has it affected instructional and assessment practices?
5. How are fourth grade teachers and school districts using the information gained by the NJ ASK4?

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

This study had several delimitations and limitations. The subjects of this study were delimited to fourth grade teachers in Bergen County New Jersey teaching in public schools with District Factor Groups of I or J. There are currently 32 districts with DFGs of I or J (New Jersey Department of Education, 2006). From this pool, three districts were randomly selected for the focus group interviews.

Limitations of the study include the possible bias of the researcher. The researcher is presently a school teacher in a DFG I district and has administered the NJ ASK testing in grades 4 and 5. Additionally, the data collection took place over a two and a half month period in 2007 after the ASK4 is administered. The information gained from this research is specific to that time frame.

year in exchange for federal aid. Additionally, states must certify that all teachers of core academic subjects are highly qualified to teach using state-set definitions. States must also assess students once a year in Science using state designed tests in grades 3-5, 6-9, and 10-12 by the end of the 2007-2008 school year. Schools that do not make adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years must provide public school choice and supplemental educational service to those students. NCLB aims for 100% of all students to score in the proficient range by 2014.

New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (ASK4): "NJ ASK assesses student achievement in the knowledge and skills defined by the New Jersey Core Curriculum in language arts literacy, mathematics, and science. "It was implemented in 2003 to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. It is administered over a 5 day period, each day lasting between 60-100 minutes. The tests contain multiple choice and open-ended questions (ETS, 2006).

District Factor Groups (DFGs): DFG's were developed for the purpose of comparing student performance on statewide assessments across similar demographical school districts. The DFGs represent an approximate measure of a districts socioeconomic status. DFG's are useful when doing analysis of school districts because they share similar characteristics. (New Jersey Department of Education, 2006).

Core Curriculum Content Standards (CCCS): The New Jersey State Board of Education adopted the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards in 1996. The CCCS is a framework for educational reform in New Jersey's public schools. The standards were created to improve student achievement by defining what all students

should know and be able to do at the end of thirteen years of public education (New Jersey Department of Education, 2006).

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA): This federal law was enacted in 1965 and has been reauthorized every five years since its inception. The Act funds primary and secondary education. The funds are used for professional development, instructional materials, resources for educational programs, and for promoting parental involvement. Amendments to the Act included: Improving America's Schools Act under the Clinton administration in 1994 and the No Child Left Behind Act under the Bush administration in 2002. (Wikipedia, 2006).

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): AYP "is an individual state's measure of yearly progress toward reaching state academic standards. "Adequate Yearly Progress" is the minimum level of improvement that states, school districts, and schools must achieve each year (No Child Left Behind, 2006)."

Organization of the Study

Chapter I presents an introduction to the study. This chapter presents the problem, the significance, and the purpose of this study. Guiding questions, delimitations, limitations, definition of terms, and the organization of the study are included.

Chapter II reviews the related literature on high-stakes testing. External influences, test preparation, content and mode of instruction, assessment strategies, and the use and reporting of test results are discussed.

Chapter III addresses the methodology of the study. This chapter includes an introduction, a discussion of the population, instrument design, research procedures,

techniques for data collection, background on participants, jury of experts, data collection, and analysis.

Chapter IV presents the research findings using a qualitative analysis.

Research questions are clustered for the analysis and include quotes and comments by from a predetermined question route. Common themes and patterns are discussed in the analysis.

Chapter V presents a summary, the conclusions, implications of the study and recommendations for policy, practice, and research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

On January 8, 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was signed into law by President George W. Bush (New Jersey Department of Education, 2004). NCLB changes the federal government's role in K-12 education by focusing on student achievement as a way of measuring a school's success. The Act also contains the President's four education reform principles; stronger accountability of results, increased flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have proven to work.

Nationally NCLB changes the face of public education in a number of ways. It requires states to provide tests to assess standards-based assessments in grades 3 through 8 in Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics beginning with the 2005-2006 school year. States must also administer Science assessments once in grades 3-5, 6-9, and 10-12, beginning with the 2007-08 school year. Since the spring of 2003, all fourth graders take the New Jersey Assessment Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK4).

Federal expectation is that each state will provide tests that are grounded in the state's content standards and assess student's critical thinking skills. States are mandated to design or purchase texts that are aligned with the state content performance standards, are the same for all children, consistent with nationally

recognized professional and technical standards, and use multiple measures that include higher-order thinking skills.

NCLB is the most aggressive federal effort to improve elementary and secondary education. This legislation seeks to raise the level of achievement for all students and to reduce the achievement gap in performance of students from different backgrounds (Abrams, 2004). Politicians say we must have high standards for all students regardless of wealth, disability, or language barriers (Casbarro, 2005). Do we expect poor schools to do as well as wealthy schools? Or schools with higher ESL students to score as well as schools with lower enrollments? Politicians would say, “Yes” but the reality is that it does make a difference. To date the rate of success on these tests is far lower for Black and Hispanic students than it is for their White or Asian counterparts. Narrowing standards on a few academic areas raises uncomfortable questions in areas of class and race (Goldberg, 2004).

In order to meet the mandates under NCLB, New Jersey administers the NJ ASK4 to students in grade 4 to assess student achievement in standards based assessment. The NJ ASK4 is a criterion-referenced test (CRTs). A criterion-referenced test focuses on what a student is expected to know and is gauged on whether the students have achieved the standards that have been taught (Neill, 2003).

The CRTs primary purpose is to determine the specific skill level of a student. It measures the specific skills students can master by the end of a grade being tested. The content items are selected to measure specific skill areas including higher order and basic skills. The primary use for CRTs is to aid instruction by identifying student’s strengths and weaknesses on specific skills.

Many states including New Jersey use CRTs to measure statewide curriculum effectiveness under NCLB. In criterion-referenced tests (CRTs) the objectives for the teachers and the CRTs are developed at the state level. In New Jersey these are stated in the Core Curriculum Content Standards. The objectives provide guidance to the teachers on what students should learn and what they will be tested on. The teacher teaches toward measurable stated objectives. The alignment of the test items with the objectives make for quality validity.

These tests are also accompanied by a reward and penalty structure for districts as a means of improving student achievement (New Jersey Department of Education, 2004). Schools that do not meet “adequately yearly progress quotas” are placed on the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) list as required under the federal law. The AYP refers to the minimum level of improvement that states, school districts, and schools must achieve each year as they progress toward the ESEA goal of having all students reaching the proficient level on state tests by 2014. The target numbers for districts to meet are for all students regardless of individual needs.

The consequences for getting on the AYP list are extensive (National Education Association, 2004). The first year a school is placed on the list, it will be excused if the percentage of students who failed decreased by ten percent, or if the students in the subgroup showed progress in at least one additional area of academic performance. If a school fails to make AYP for two years, the first year of school improvement begins. Schools must notify parents and prepare a two-year improvement plan, use at least 10 percent of Title I funds for professional development, provide public school choice for students, use 5-15 percent of Title I

funds for transportation, receive federal school improvement funds, and technical assistance from the school district. Schools that fail to make the AYP for three years must continue the activities from the previous year, plus provide students with supplemental services, and use 5-15 percent of Title 1 funds for supplemental services or 20 percent combined for public school choice or supplemental services. Schools that fail to make the AYP for four years must continue to provide for school choice and supplemental services. The local school district must also implement one of the following: replace staff relevant to failure, implement a new curriculum, extend school year or day, appoint an outside expert, or restructure internal organization. Schools that fail to make the AYP for five years must continue to provide for public school choice and supplemental services. They must also prepare a plan and make arrangements for restructuring. For schools that fail to make the AYP for six years the district must reopen the school as a public charter school, replace all or most of the school staff, turn operations over to the state, and undertake other major reforms and restructuring.

States must also provide individual reports of student performance to parents, teachers, and principals in a comprehensible and uniform format. The NJ ASK4 test results in New Jersey place the student in one of three categories: partial proficient, proficient, or advanced proficient for each area tested.

States must also participate in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), otherwise known as the “nation’s report card.” State participation in NAEP has been voluntary until now. Each year, every school’s data is published for the public and educators to review.

“NEA believes all schools should have high expectations for all students and that educators should be accountable for student learning. But as educators try to implement NCLB, they are finding serious flaws in the laws that prevent fair and accurate assessment of student progress and educator quality (National Education Association, 2004).” The NEA fears that the new testing requirements in elementary schools has the potential for disrupting the more comprehensive and school assessment programs developed by states over the past fifteen years. They also share in the concern of teachers and other educators about the heavy reliance on standardized testing. Pencil and paper tests may not go far enough in measuring the skills of students – skills that they will need to compete and succeed in the workplace. Federal requirements for annual testing in math and reading have already affected state assessments programs that measure student progress in other subjects such as Science, History, and Geography. Also, four reports released by the Harvard Civil Rights Project, reveal that the law’s sanctions are falling hard on disadvantaged and minority students.

The NEA feels that the law was developed by politicians while recommendations from educators were ignored. The education community wants ESEA/NCLB to allow for alternate ways to measure student performance. They want remedies for schools that are struggling and the resources to carry out the law. NEA is not alone in its concerns over the law. Many groups like the American Association of School Administrators, American Federation of Teachers, Council of Chief State School Officers, FairTest, National Association of Elementary Principals, state legislatures, members of Congress, and many others share in this concern.

American Association of School Administrators' Director Paul Houston (2004) feels that the NCLB's mandate that guarantees every child be proficient by 2014 is unrealistic. "We cannot expect all groups of students, including special education and English language learners to meet the same academic targets as the rest of the population at the same time." He feels that NCLB, with its emphasis on punishing schools, is not the law that will take us to this destination.

Vincent Ferrandino (2004), executive director for the National Association of Elementary Principals, mentioned in a letter to Congress that his organization applauds what NCLB is trying to do. Unfortunately the funding and resources are not in place to reach the high expectations by 2014. NAESP is willing to work with Congress to address issues such as funding, testing requirements specifically with English language learners and the special education population, AYP requirements, and to instill a system of continual review of NCLB mandates.

The International Reading Association (2004) also has its concerns. In the United States there has been an increase in policy makers' and educators' reliance on high-stakes tests, in which a single score is used to make important decisions about a student, a school, or a district. The Board of Directors position statement calls for an evaluation of the impact of current types and levels of testing on teaching quality, student motivation, educational policy making, and the public's perception of the quality of schooling. Their central concern is that testing has become a means for controlling instruction as opposed to a way to gather information about students. The IRA feels that testing is an important part of education, but it is only one type of educational assessment.

In this climate of testing and high accountability this research addresses the influence of external sources and teacher's practices on instruction and assessment. Analyzing the impact of high-stakes testing on instructional and assessment practices will help policy makers and educators make better informed decisions about accountability systems and their impact on educational practices. By identifying undesirable and desirable practices, methods can be recommended to increase best practices in the classroom.

RELATED LITERATURE

External Influences

Many federal and state political leaders have come to believe that negative and positive coercion, through test results, is the way to improve schools (Casbarro, 2005). Problems arise when the primary assessment of schools is reduced to test results. School districts are then pressured to turn classrooms into test-prep centers, hire principals who can achieve high test scores, and evaluate teachers on student performance on these tests. Most high-stakes tests are viewed by the public as accurate measures of a student's abilities. The higher the scores, the smarter the students, the better the school.

Experience with high-stakes tests dating back to the 19th century indicates real dangers associated with test preparation practices. The pressure to the increased demands of high-stakes tests often causes teachers to focus on test preparation at the expense of other subject areas (Pedulla, Abrams, Madaus, Russell, Ramos & Miao, 2003; Neill, 2003).

The National Center for Fair and Open Testing, Fairtest (2004), feels that tests can control curriculum and instruction. Raising test scores under the NCLB Act has become the single most important indicator of school improvement. As a result, teachers and administrators feel enormous pressure to ensure that test scores go up. Schools narrow and change the curriculum to match the test. Teachers teach only what is covered. Methods of teaching resort to multiple choice formats. Teaching starts to resemble the test. Teaching to the test leads primarily to improved test-taking skills, but increased test scores does not mean improvement in academic performance. The United States is the only economically advanced nation that relies so heavily on multiple choice tests. Other nations use performance-based assessments that are evaluated on real work.

In a study by Abrams (2004), ninety percent of teachers surveyed nationally reported pressure from their district superintendent, while seventy-nine percent felt pressure from their building principal to improve students' performance on these tests. Many teachers felt that the state testing has led them to teach in ways that contradict best practices. Teachers put more emphasis in preparing students for these high-stakes tests. This highlights that state testing can have negative unintended effects. Overemphasis on test preparation activities has given rise to the validity of scores as accurate measures of students' achievement since specific preparation activities such as coaching, teaching test taking skills, and instruction geared towards the test can yield invalid test results.

Hamilton, Stetcher, et. al. (2007) launched a project funded by the RAND Corporation to understand how educators in California, Georgia, and Pennsylvania

are responding to the accountability requirements. Teachers noted the lack of consistency between state standards and curriculum materials. A majority of teachers felt that the accountability system reduced morale and negatively affected teaching. Teachers reported narrowing the curriculum to focus on tested topics. They also used certain types of test questions and topics in their teaching. Some teachers reported on concentrating more on students near the proficiency cut off. Teachers felt there was insufficient time for instruction and planning. However, teachers did see beneficial outcomes such as a more rigorous curricula and increased focus on student achievement.

Moore (1994) analyzed teacher testing attitudes related to achievement testing in elementary schools. Teachers were dissatisfied with the climate of pressure. The results verified negative attitudes towards the test, pressure to increase test scores, and inappropriate testing practices. What is lacking is a climate focused on improving learning rather than improved test performance.

Politicians' principles of setting high standards for all students regardless of economic standards may be unrealistic. Israel, Beaulieu & Hartless (2001) found in their research increasing evidence that indicates that schools are not solely responsible for academic success. Families and communities must be engaged in promoting educational achievement along with the public schools. Community, social, capital, and structural attributes exerted a significant influence on student's achievement having a positive effect on test scores and in students staying in school. Family background also had a significant influence on educational achievement. Family income, two-parent households, and parents that attended college all

significantly affected higher test scores, grade averages, and the ability for the students to stay in school. These findings are also conclusive with Parcel and Dufur's (2001) research that human capital at home and social capital at school can either boost or threaten student achievement. Okapala, Okapala & Smith (2001) found that student participation in federal free/reduced lunch programs had a negative impact on academic achievement. In their study the percentage of students who mastered mathematics increased as income/wealth indicators rose. Their results further support that family social economic background and academic achievement are correlated.

Testing has become a politically charged issue that is reshaping public education. External influence from the federal government and politicians is affecting how superintendents, principals, and teachers are addressing instruction and assessment in our nation's schools. With the reauthorization of NCLB due in 2007, positive and negative outcomes must be evaluated to establish sound educational practices in our school systems.

Test Preparation

Test preparation activities are influenced by pressure perceived from high-stakes testing. Pedulla, Abrams, and Madaus (2003) surveyed 12,000 teachers in high-stakes and low-stakes testing states. High-stakes testing states are those that have testing aligned to their Core Curriculum Content Standards under NCLB and must meet adequate yearly progress quotas under federal law. What the researchers found was that teachers in high-stakes testing states spent more time engaging in test preparation and began test preparations earlier in the year. Many teachers focused test preparation on students who were on the border of passing or moving to the next

level. The teachers also used materials that resembled the test, used commercial or state-developed test preparation materials, targeted special groups of students for more intense preparation, and used more motivational tactics. Teachers in high-stakes states felt more pressure than teachers in low-pressure states. Teachers felt that there was so much pressure for high scores that there was little time to teach anything not covered by the high-stakes test. Those findings support that state testing programs may narrow curriculum.

Stetcher, Barron, Chun & Ross (2000) surveyed principals, fourth and seventh grade teachers in a state that had high-stakes testing. Positive results indicated that teachers and principals were familiar with and understood the reform movement. Math teachers indicated more change than writing teachers, and elementary teachers reported more change than middle school teachers. Schools with higher assessment scores reported alignment between the curriculum and standards. A negative consequence was that teachers believed test preparation was a contributing factor to achievement gains. Schedules were modified and instructional time was shifted so that more emphasis was placed on tested subjects.

Opponents of accountability systems say pressure leads to deleterious effects (McNeil, 2000). Past research suggests that pressure can lead to decontextualized test preparation and lead to didactic teaching practices (Smith, 1991; Cohen & Hill, 2001). Pressure may also encourage the use of didactic instruction which can contribute to test achievement (Firestone, Monfils & Schorr, 2004). Testing generates very explicit test preparation activities.

Content and Mode of Instruction

In many states, the quality of public education and the competence of teachers are being measured by scores on standardized achievement tests like the ASK4 (Posner, 2004). Opponents of high-stakes tests claim that the pressure from these tests makes teachers devote all classroom time and resources to preparing students to do well on these tests. This has been phrased as “teaching to the test.” Proponents of high-stakes tests argue that the tests measure the success of teaching the curriculum and “teaching to the test” is really “teaching to the curriculum.”

Much research addresses the effects of state testing on instruction (Abrams, 2004). A common finding is that teachers report spending a greater amount of time in content areas on which students are tested. In Virginia, 722 teachers were surveyed. Eighty percent indicated that high-stakes testing affected instruction especially in the content of daily focus. In some states that have high-stakes tests that require students to formulate and provide a written response to the questions, there is an increased emphasis on writing and higher-level thinking. Another study cited by Abrams showed that the use of technology can be adversely affected for instructional purpose because students are required to hand write their responses on these tests. In another study cited by Abrams sixty-three percent of Florida teachers indicated pressure so great they had little time to teach anything other than what appeared on the test. A majority of teachers indicated they had reallocated instructional schedules to allow more time to be spent on tested content while decreasing time on material that was not on the high-stakes test. Teachers also reported decreased time spent on enrichment activities in order to prepare for the state test.

In the early 1990s, studies found that student's success on high-stakes tests was not reflected by other assessment measures (American Educational Research Association, 2003). Apparently, teachers were narrowing their instruction to focus on the specific items in the tests, instead of the broader knowledge and skills that the tests were designed to measure. Recent studies by the Rand Corporation and the National Board on Education Testing and Public Policy confirm this conclusion. Teachers reallocate their time to emphasize subjects on state tests.

According to Jennings & Retner (2006) research conducted by the Center on Educational Policy reported seventy-one percent of schools are spending more time in reading and math, sometimes at the expense of subjects not tested. The subject most affected is social studies. Sixty percent of the districts require a specific amount of time for reading in the elementary schools. Berliner & Nichols (2007) also documented the narrowing of curriculum to just what is tested and found an increase in time spent on test preparation.

In Pedulla's et. al. (2003) research, teachers reported that they spent more time in tested areas and less on instruction in non-core subject areas. It was also reported that testing influenced the amount of time using various instructional methods like individual-seat work, whole-group instruction, cooperative learning, and working through problems similar to those that are on the test.

The American Educational Research Association argues in *Standards and Tests: Keeping Them Aligned* (2003), that alignment is the core of standards-based education. Tests must be designed to measure a student's performance of those

standards that are clearly defined. Their call for alignment is built on 70 years of research on the development, evaluation and use of tests.

Taylor, Shepard, Kinner & Rosenthal (2002) found in their random sample of 1,000 Colorado teachers that standards had a greater impact on improving instruction than did the high-stakes testing done in their state. Teachers aligned their curriculum with instruction. Standards were found to improve the quality of writing instruction, reading instruction, probability, geometry and problem solving explanations in mathematics. Research has consistently shown that teachers generally have positive views of content standards and find that they provide an instructional framework to ensure homogeneity across classrooms with regard to instructional content and facilitates collaboration with colleagues (Abrams, 2004).

Casabarro (2005) suggests that when the primary assessment of schools is reduced to tests, the pressure is to turn classes into test-prep centers. Is turning classrooms into test-prep centers and focusing instruction to just what is tested at the expenditure of other subject areas contributing to best practices in our nation's classrooms? One needs to be mindful of the unintended consequences that policies may have in real situations. While the intention may be sound the implications of how it is addressed in the classroom should be evaluated and responded to.

Assessment Strategies

Assessment involves the systematic and purposeful collection of data to inform actions (International Reading Association, 2004). The K-12 community needs to initiate a dialogue about testing and assessments as tools to improve what we do in the classrooms instead of as a way to measure success or failure. Standardized

and criterion-referenced tests when used as a part of a larger assessment can provide invaluable information to guide instruction, curriculum, and staff development (Custer, 2003).

Pedulla et. al. (2003) reported in their study that teachers in high-stakes test states reflected the format of the state test in designing their own assessments. In a survey of teacher's in Florida, a majority of teachers stated that they changed their assessment practices by modeling their own classroom tests after the format of the state test (Abrams, 2004). Ninety percent said that the state test required them teach in ways contrary to their own ideas of good practice. Janson (2002) also did a descriptive study of the assessment practices of third and fifth grade science teachers that administered the Ohio State's proficiency test. The findings showed that the assessment practices of these teachers were not aligned with Ohio's proficiency test. The teachers relied heavily on the packaged assessments that came with their textbook series and used little teacher-made tests. The study found that textbooks and their assessment packages are not aligned to most state standards and teachers need help in developing better assessments.

The practice of testing specific material at one particular time is a common practice in American schools today. Because technology has expanded the amount of information available, we need to teach students the skills necessary to think and make decisions about the knowledge they have available to them. We must base student evaluation not just on the recall of information but on the quality of the work they produce (Culbertson and Jalongo, 1999).

Aligning assessment with high-stakes testing has its pros and cons. While it may give students practice in answering questions allowing them to generate a higher score on the test, simply modeling all assessments after a high-stakes test doesn't give a whole picture of a student. A comprehensive assessment using multiple tools is a more effective measure than narrowly defining assessment towards a single indicator. This generates the capacity of gathering more information to target areas for improvement.

Use and Reporting of Test Results

In James H. McMillan's (2006) article, *The Impact of High-Stakes Test Results on Teacher's Instructional and Classroom Assessment Practice*, he researched the relationship between teachers' receipt of high-stakes test scores and changes in their instruction and assessment practices. Seven hundred twenty-two elementary, middle, and high school teachers were surveyed. Positive results showed that most teachers made changes that emphasized depth of learning and higher-level cognition. Teachers collaborated more and there was more formative instruction.

An analysis of the relationship between teachers receiving scores and change in their instructional and assessment practices suggest that there is more of a change if scores are received in the summer or fall and not at the end of the year (McMillan, 2005). There is evidence that teachers' change more if given results of both the previous year's and current year's students.

Jennings & Retner's (2006) research based on a comprehensive review of NCLB by the Center on Educational Policy, found that schools are paying more attention to the alignment of the curriculum and instruction and analyzing test score

data more closely. These changes are occurring in schools that have not made AYP in two years. Students are also taking more tests. In 2002, nineteen states had annual reading and mathematics tests, by 2006 every state had such testing. States and districts have repeatedly voiced frustrations over the requirements to administer state exams to students with cognitive disabilities or who speak limited or no English. Modifications that have been made are not deemed enough by most state officials or local educators.

Most educators felt that they would benefit to improve their skills by using data for decision-making, to identify effective instructional practices, and to teach low-performing students (Hamilton, Stetcher, et al., 2007). Teachers are also dissatisfied with using proficient or not proficient as a way to distinguish adequate yearly progress instead of using progress indicators over time.

Additionally, teachers viewed the data gained from the testing in three categories; district level, classroom use, and reporting (Pedulla, et. al, 2003). At the district level teachers felt the use of test scores for student accountability was appropriate and their use for teacher/administrator accountability the least appropriate. Teachers felt these scores were used to hold schools and districts accountable, to rank schools, and remediate students. Many teachers felt that their students' test results influence their teaching on a daily basis. Fifty percent used results to plan instruction and to select instructional materials and use them to evaluate student progress. Very few used the results for student-specific decisions like grouping and student grades.

Data from these high-stakes tests as well as national assessments should be used to increase students' achievement. Meaningful and useful student test data needs to be gathered. Data should help in aligning local curriculum and assessments to state and national assessment and revise curriculum and instructional practices to increase student achievement and enhance performance (Sindelar, 2006). Districts should also use the data to inform and create improvement plans. These plans should serve the purpose of identifying areas for improvement, selecting interventions or new approaches, and to collect data to evaluate progress. It should engage an entire team in analyzing data, should include time and resources to plan, and should highlight areas for improvement (Education Commission of States, 2002).

(Pedulla, et. al., 2003) found that teachers felt that the test brought much-needed attention to education issues. They felt that the test measured high standards of achievement, but that the fluctuating scores from year to year reflect changes in the characteristic of students rather than school effectiveness. Elementary teachers felt that media reporting about the state tests was not accurate and was unfair to teachers and inaccurately portrayed the quality of education and complexity of teaching. Three-quarters of the teachers found that the benefit of the testing program was not worth the time and energy.

Conclusion

One needs to listen to teachers to see if the testing program is having the desired results or unintended consequences. Their opinions must be entered into the formation of sound testing policy. Teachers' perspectives on mandated teachers' accountability and students' testing policies indicate negative views, particularly over

tightened controls over instruction and interference in teaching practice (Wei, 2002). The pressure teachers feel to incorporate the content and skills can lead to extreme forms of responses from skewed instruction, narrowing curriculum, teaching to the test, increased hours spent on test preparation, to teachers cheating. Many organizations and groups opposed to high-stakes tests agree that they do offer valuable information and they do have their place, but they should not be solely used in the assessment and evaluation of students or be used as the focal point of instruction (Culbertson and Jalongo, 1999).

Why do high-stakes tests cause problems? According to the International Reading Association (2004), they see several problems with this type of assessment. First, tests are imperfect. Basing important decisions on these tests can lead to bad decisions. These decisions can have a negative impact on students, teachers, and unfortunate legal and economic consequences for districts. Decisions should be made from using multiple sources.

Second, high-stakes test can narrow curriculum and inflate the importance of the tests. As consequences for low performing schools are raised, teachers will spend more of their time teaching the areas tested on the test to improve scores. This will take time away from other curriculum areas, and narrow the curriculum. This will especially be prevalent in high-poverty schools that tend to have low test scores.

Another negative impact of high-stakes tests is that sometimes educators will only focus on students who are low-performing in order to increase scores, or they encourage kids to not show up for tests. Finally, instructional decision making is

taken away from teachers and diverted to authorities away from the school. This can diminish the quality of education.

Many researchers including Linn (1993) Mehrens (1998) and Lane, Parke & Stone (1998) have stressed the importance of collecting evidence on the impact of standards and assessment on curriculum, classroom instruction, and assessment practices. This evidence will determine whether the assessment is living up to its intended purposes and evaluate whether there are any unintended or negative consequences. The results are informative to the developers of these assessments as well as those directly affected by the assessment.

When high-stakes tests come with sanctions, unexpected consequences may outweigh the intended benefits (Abrams, 2004). There is a difference in opinion as to whether this change improves the quality of education to promote quality teaching and to encourage higher standards of achievement or whether it limits the scope of classroom instruction and student learning in undeniable ways. This debate is one that policymakers, legislators, administrators, teachers, students, and parents will grapple with as the provisions under NCLB continue to influence public education.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to analyze the impact of the New Jersey's ASK4 testing on the instructional and assessment practices of fourth grade teachers to help policy makers, school leaders, and educators make well-informed decisions about accountability systems and their impact on instructional and assessment practices. The researcher gathered data by conducting three separate focus group interviews with fourth grade teachers from school districts in Bergen County with a District Factor Grouping of I. This factor grouping system is useful when comparing student performance on statewide assessments across similar demographical school districts since wealth has been determined to be a significant factor in student performance (Okapala, et. al. 2001; Israel et. al. 2001; Parcel & Dufur, 2001).

The researcher had a predetermined question route compromised of twenty questions that were asked over a one hour time period. The instrument was reviewed prior to the interviews by a five member jury of experts that consisted of three fourth grade teachers, one principal, and one superintendent. All agreed that the questions answered the guiding questions and were in alignment with the purpose of the study.

The data was analyzed looking for common themes and patterns to gain a better understanding of whether the ASK4 has had any impact on fourth grade teachers' instructional and assessment practices. A discussion of the research

findings are in Chapter IV with conclusions and recommendations following in Chapter V.

A qualitative approach in the form of focus group interviews was utilized to gather data because feelings, thoughts, and intentions are not something that can be observed therefore interviewing is the best way to enter another person's perspective (Patton, 2002). According to Rea & Parker (2005) focus groups are a valuable research tool as an information-gathering technique for in-depth qualitative research. They can aid in gaining a deeper understanding of a subject matter by analyzing themes, patterns, and nuances that exist in a population. In a focus group, participants are able to hear other responses and make additional comments which allow for high-quality data collection in a social context. The context of the social balance provides for checks and balances and weeds out false and extreme responses.

Focus groups are more formally known as focused group depth interviews (Rea & Parker, 2005). This term designates several important characteristics of the focus group. The term focused is used because it implies discussion on a specific topic. Group indicates that the participants share an interest in the subject matter being discussed and will interact with one another. The term depth is derived from the nature of the discussion in that it is more penetrating than other forms of research design. Finally, the term interview implies that a moderator is directing the discussions and obtaining information from the group.

Much contemporary social research is devoted to whether a program produces some outcome or result. This research model analyzed whether the NJ ASK4 testing has had any impact on the instructional and assessment practices of fourth grade

teachers. Cook and Campbell (1979) have argued that three conditions must be met before inferring a cause and effect relationship. The first is covariation - the changes in the cause must be related to the effect. The second is temporal precedence - the cause must occur before the effect. And finally, no plausible alternative explanation should explain the phenomenon. The cause must be the only reasonable explanation. If there are other factors, the confidence level of whether a cause-effect relationship actually exists is questionable. In social sciences, the last condition is the hardest to prove. Through the design of this study, the three conditions will be addressed to infer such a relationship does exist.

Good research design can minimize alternative explanations to hypothesized cause and effect relationships so threats to validity are minimized. This research model will do this by argument and observation. In order to address covariation, carefully worded research questions addressed whether teachers changed their style of assessment or instruction as a direct effect of the testing. Similarly, through careful wording of questions, temporal precedence was addressed by the responses of the participants to time analysis of teaching and instructional styles. Finally, the teachers themselves can articulate whether a cause and effect relationship does exist between the testing and their own practices.

Trochim (2006) distinguishes that multiple groups are superior as there is only one threat to internal validity, selection bias. This design will utilize three focus groups. A qualitative design was selected by the researcher as the optimum technique to gather information on teachers' past and current techniques in instruction and assessment in order to acquire a thorough understanding on whether a cause/effect

relationship exists. It allows for a deeper understanding of the issues. The purpose is to probe the ideas of the interviewees on the phenomenon of interest.

Population

Fundamental to the process of establishing a focus group is who the potential participants are. Rea and Parker (2005) suggest that focus groups are more effective when they consist of participants who share many of the same characteristics.

Homogeneous groups tend to share ideas and opinions more freely. Homogeneous group participants have been found to relate to one another well, and tend to generate high quality responses.

In general the number of focus groups should be a minimum of two, with no more than ten to fourteen (Rea & Parker, 2005). At least two groups are needed so the researcher can be certain that she is not merely observing a unique set of circumstances exclusive to one group. More than ten to fourteen groups, the information becomes repetitive and new information is rare.

The researcher chose three suburban school districts with District Factor Groupings of I located in Bergen County, New Jersey. The DFGs represent an approximate measure of a districts socioeconomic status with I and J districts being the most affluent. The classification is a useful tool in comparing similar school districts in analysis. DFGs are based on education, occupational status, unemployment, poverty levels, and income. The data is derived from the US Census Bureau and is updated every ten years. Currently, there are 128 I or J districts in New Jersey, 32 in Bergen County (New Jersey Department of Education, 2006).

The researcher's groups were randomly chosen from the 32 districts with I or J status. Participants in the research were determined by which school superintendents agreed to participate in the study and who choose to attend after reviewing the data and consenting to participation.

The researcher contacted the superintendents in each of the three districts by phone and sent a letter explaining the study. Once verbal agreement was established the researcher met informally with each superintendent and acquired a signed consent form on district letterhead. The researcher mailed a letter to each principal explaining the purpose of the study. The researcher contacted the principals in each of the schools by phone to establish intent and ask for their cooperation in selecting a day and time to conduct the focus group interviews with the fourth grade teachers. Days and times were established in each of the three districts.

District 1 had one elementary school. The principal of this school requested the consent forms and letters of solicitation from the researcher to distribute to her fourth grade teachers. The principal met with the fourth grade teachers, explained the study, and distributed the consent forms and the letters of solicitation. The principal mailed the signed consent forms back to the researcher.

District 2 had three elementary schools. The principals in each of the schools were contacted by the researcher. All the principals requested that the researcher come to their school and explain the study to the fourth grade teachers. A contact teacher was given in each school to establish a common meeting time. The researcher met with the fourth grade teachers in each school separately on different days. The researcher explained the study, gave each teacher a letter of solicitation

and consent form and reviewed the information on the two documents. The teachers were asked to sign the documents if they agreed to participate in the study.

District 3 had one elementary school. This principal requested that the researcher contact a lead teacher to establish the day and time of the interview. The researcher contacted the teacher and established the date and time. The teacher requested that the researcher mail the solicitation letters and the consent forms to her and she would distribute the documents to the teachers. On the day of the interview they would sign the consent forms prior to the interview.

Instrument Design

The one hour discussion was comprised of a set of questions designed to elicit the highest quality responses. Appendix A contains the question route used in this study. Probes were utilized when necessary and were conversational and offered in a natural style (Patton, 2002). Rea & Parker (2005) suggest that the order in which questions are presented can effect the overall study quite significantly. Therefore careful planning of when questions were asked was utilized beginning with questions related to external controls to those that were related to internal controls.

According to Rea & Parker (2005), the first question should be relatively easy and related to the subject matter. The main purpose, to stimulate interest in continuing the interview without offending, threatening, confusing, or boring the respondent. This interview began with an opening question that asked for a feeling in order to evoke the respondent's interest by getting them to talk, get involved, and feel comfortable with the moderator.

Related questions were sub-grouped together with a prefatory statement so that the respondents could focus and concentrate on specific issues without distraction. Patton (2002) suggests that a preface alerts interviewees to the nature of the questions that are coming, directs awareness, and focuses attention. Secondly, it gives respondents a few seconds to organize thoughts before answering.

Sensitive questions regarding the teachers own personal instruction and assessment techniques were placed later in the interview (Rea & Parker, 2005). They were placed later due to two factors. First, if a respondent acts negatively or gets offended by a question they may decide to terminate their participation in the interview, but the information obtained from previous questions may still be usable. Second, if a good rapport has been established, there is an increased likelihood that the respondent will answer the questions that come later in the interview.

Reliability checks were established to insure validity (Rea & Parker, 2005). Throughout the interview, the same question was asked in a somewhat different manner within the instrument. Tables 1 through 5 summarize the reliability checks.

It is important in an interview to provide an interviewee the opportunity to have the final say, so a closing question that asks for additional information ended the interview (Rea & Parker, 2005). Respondents were also provided with a stamped envelope, addressed to the researcher to send any additional statement or personal message after the interview had concluded.

The entire discussion was recorded using two tape recorders, with permission from the participants established prior to the discussion. Confidentiality was assured by the use of tent cards for each participant.

TABLE 1

Research Question 1

	How do fourth grade teachers perceive the NJ ASK4 as an effective tool for the assessment of fourth grade students?
Q01 What feeling did you record on your card? The feeling you chose was _____. Tell me why you chose that feeling to describe the testing.	X
Q02 Overall, how do you perceive the ASK4 as an effective assessment tool for fourth grade students?	X
Q03 If you had the power to do so, what would you add or delete from the test to make it a more effective assessment tool?	X
Q04 There is great pressure put on administrators to increase scores. How do administrators in your school district specifically address student performance on this test? Please acknowledge individuals by title only.	
Q05 What materials do you possess that help students prepare for the ASK4? Who purchased them?	
Q06 How do you prepare the students for the test? Be very specific.	
Q07 Approximately how many classroom hours are spent preparing students for the ASK4?	
Q08 Describe how you teach today and how it is similar or different than how you've taught in the past.	
Q09 Overall, how many hours per week do you spend teaching each subject area?	
Q10 Has that amount of time always been the same or has that changed over time?	
Q11 To what extent has the ASK4 influenced your instruction?	
Q12 Suppose I was a student teacher assigned to your classroom. What types of assessment tools would I see being used in your classroom?	
Q13 Look back to when you started teaching. How have your assessment techniques changed?	
Q14 To what extent has the ASK4 influenced your assessment?	
Q15 How and when are the results of the ASK4 given to you?	X
Q16 How is the data from the ASK4 used in your district?	X
Q17 How many years have you been teaching?	
Q18 How many years have you been teaching fourth grade?	
Q19 What is your age range by a show of hands? If you would prefer not to answer, do not raise your hand. 22-30? 31-40? 41-50? Over 50?	
Q20 Is there anything that you would care to add that would provide me with additional insight into your views of the ASK4 testing?	

TABLE 2

Research Question 2

	How do fourth grade teachers perceive the NJ ASK4 as having any effect on their instructional methods?
Q01 What feeling did you record on your card? The feeling you chose was _____. Tell me why you chose that feeling to describe the testing.	
Q02 Overall, how do you perceive the ASK4 as an effective assessment tool for fourth grade students?	
Q03 If you had the power to do so, what would you add or delete from the test to make it a more effective assessment tool?	
Q04 There is great pressure put on administrators to increase scores. How do administrators in your school district specifically address student performance on this test? Please acknowledge individuals by title only.	
Q05 What materials do you possess that help students prepare for the ASK4? Who purchased them?	X
Q06 How do you prepare the students for the test? Be very specific.	X
Q07 Approximately how many classroom hours are spent preparing students for the ASK4?	X
Q08 Describe how you teach today and how it is similar or different than how you've taught in the past.	X
Q09 Overall, how many hours per week do you spend teaching each subject area?	X
Q10 Has that amount of time always been the same or has that changed over time?	X
Q11 To what extent has the ASK4 influenced your instruction?	X
Q12 Suppose I was a student teacher assigned to your classroom. What types of assessment tools would I see being used in your classroom?	
Q13 Look back to when you started teaching. How have your assessment techniques changed?	
Q14 To what extent has the ASK4 influenced your assessment?	
Q15 How and when are the results of the ASK4 given to you?	X
Q16 How is the data from the ASK4 used in your district?	X
Q17 How many years have you been teaching?	
Q18 How many years have you been teaching fourth grade?	
Q19 What is your age range by a show of hands? If you would prefer not to answer, do not raise your hand. 22-30? 31-40? 41-50? Over 50?	
Q20 Is there anything that you would care to add that would provide me with additional insight into your views of the ASK4 testing?	

TABLE 3
Research Question 3

	How do fourth grade teachers perceive the NJ ASK4 as having any effect on their assessment practice?
Q01 What feeling did you record on your card? The feeling you chose was _____. Tell me why you chose that feeling to describe the testing.	
Q02 Overall, how do you perceive the ASK4 as an effective assessment tool for fourth grade students?	
Q03 If you had the power to do so, what would you add or delete from the test to make it a more effective assessment tool?	
Q04 There is great pressure put on administrators to increase scores. How do administrators in your school district specifically address student performance on this test? Please acknowledge individuals by title only.	
Q05 What materials do you possess that help students prepare for the ASK4? Who purchased them?	
Q06 How do you prepare the students for the test? Be very specific.	
Q07 Approximately how many classroom hours are spent preparing students for the ASK4?	
Q08 Describe how you teach today and how it is similar or different than how you've taught in the past.	
Q09 Overall, how many hours per week do you spend teaching each subject area?	
Q10 Has that amount of time always been the same or has that changed over time?	
Q11 To what extent has the ASK4 influenced your instruction?	
Q12 Suppose I was a student teacher assigned to your classroom. What types of assessment tools would I see being used in your classroom?	X
Q13 Look back to when you started teaching. How have your assessment techniques changed?	X
Q14 To what extent has the ASK4 influenced your assessment?	X
Q15 How and when are the results of the ASK4 given to you?	
Q16 How is the data from the ASK4 used in your district?	
Q17 How many years have you been teaching?	
Q18 How many years have you been teaching fourth grade?	
Q19 What is your age range by a show of hands? If you would prefer not to answer, do not raise your hand. 22-30? 31-40? 41-50? Over 50?	
Q20 Is there anything that you would care to add that would provide me with additional insight into your views of the ASK4 testing?	

TABLE 4
Research Question 4

	Do fourth grade teachers perceive pressure from outside sources in preparing students for the NJ ASK4 test? If pressure is perceived, to what extent has it affected instructional and assessment practices?
Q01 What feeling did you record on your card? The feeling you chose was _____. Tell me why you chose that feeling to describe the testing.	
Q02 Overall, how do you perceive the ASK4 as an effective assessment tool for fourth grade students?	
Q03 If you had the power to do so, what would you add or delete from the test to make it a more effective assessment tool?	
Q04 There is great pressure put on administrators to increase scores. How do administrators in your school district specifically address student performance on this test? Please acknowledge individuals by title only.	X
Q05 What materials do you possess that help students prepare for the ASK4? Who purchased them?	X
Q06 How do you prepare the students for the test? Be very specific.	X
Q07 Approximately how many classroom hours are spent preparing students for the ASK4?	X
Q08 Describe how you teach today and how it is similar or different than how you've taught in the past.	
Q09 Overall, how many hours per week do you spend teaching each subject area?	X
Q10 Has that amount of time always been the same or has that changed over time?	X
Q11 To what extent has the ASK4 influenced your instruction?	X
Q12 Suppose I was a student teacher assigned to your classroom. What types of assessment tools would I see being used in your classroom?	X
Q13 Look back to when you started teaching. How have your assessment techniques changed?	X
Q14 To what extent has the ASK4 influenced your assessment?	X
Q15 How and when are the results of the ASK4 given to you?	
Q16 How is the data from the ASK4 used in your district?	X
Q17 How many years have you been teaching?	
Q18 How many years have you been teaching fourth grade?	
Q19 What is your age range by a show of hands? If you would prefer not to answer, do not raise your hand. 22-30? 31-40? 41-50? Over 50?	
Q20 Is there anything that you would care to add that would provide me with additional insight into your views of the ASK4 testing?	

TABLE 5

Research Question 5

	How are fourth grade teachers and school districts using the information gained by the NJ ASK4?
Q01 What feeling did you record on your card? The feeling you chose was _____. Tell me why you chose that feeling to describe the testing.	
Q02 Overall, how do you perceive the ASK4 as an effective assessment tool for fourth grade students?	
Q03 If you had the power to do so, what would you add or delete from the test to make it a more effective assessment tool?	
Q04 There is great pressure put on administrators to increase scores. How do administrators in your school district specifically address student performance on this test? Please acknowledge individuals by title only.	X
Q05 What materials do you possess that help students prepare for the ASK4? Who purchased them?	
Q06 How do you prepare the students for the test? Be very specific.	
Q07 Approximately how many classroom hours are spent preparing students for the ASK4?	
Q08 Describe how you teach today and how it is similar or different than how you've taught in the past.	
Q09 Overall, how many hours per week do you spend teaching each subject area?	
Q10 Has that amount of time always been the same or has that changed over time?	
Q11 To what extent has the ASK4 influenced your instruction?	X
Q12 Suppose I was a student teacher assigned to your classroom. What types of assessment tools would I see being used in your classroom?	
Q13 Look back to when you started teaching. How have your assessment techniques changed?	
Q14 To what extent has the ASK4 influenced your assessment?	X
Q15 How and when are the results of the ASK4 given to you?	X
Q16 How is the data from the ASK4 used in your	X

Research Procedures and Techniques for Data Collection

Rea & Parker (2005) suggest that focus groups that consist of working individuals should be held at the end of the work day. The discussions should also take place in an area that is easily accessible and convenient to the participants. Participants are more likely to attend when the location is near their work or homes.

The date, time, and location of each of the focus groups for this research were established by the principals in each of the three districts to ensure that there would be no conflicts with the school calendar. The focus group discussions took place in an area comfortable to the participants where distractions were minimal. The location was predetermined and permission was granted by the building principal. In district 1 the interview was conducted in the principal's office. The principal was not present. In districts 2 and 3 the interview was conducted in a fourth grade teacher's classroom.

The moderator (researcher) greeted each participant as they entered the designated room and established rapport by engaging in small talk and enjoying refreshments conveying that the researcher was trustworthy, honest, and non-threatening. Participants were asked to sit, each selecting their own seating arrangement around a table. Because of the sensitive nature of the discussion, the moderator permitted self selection to allow the participants to feel at ease by surrounding themselves with individuals they felt comfortable with. For the focus group discussion, the moderator was positioned so everyone could see her at the end of the table (Rea & Parker, 2005). A nameplate was in front of the moderator for reference during discussions.

The focus group began with an introduction by the moderator, including reference to the tape recorders for recording purposes and included a welcoming statement, a brief overview of the subject matter covered, and an explanation and discussion of the rules (Rea & Parker, 2005). The participants were informed of the projected length of discussion, one hour, and their involvement being completely voluntary. Incentives were disclosed, such as refreshments.

The participants in Districts 1 and 2 were given a copy of their signed consent form. In District 3 the subjects signed the form. This form outlined the protocol for data collection and the subjects' rights. The form addressed confidentiality and how it would be maintained. By signing the form the participants granted permission for the researcher to tape record the discussions for later analysis.

Each participant was given an index card, folded in half with their name written on the inside. On the outside of the card a letter was assigned to each individual visible to the moderator and the other participants in the group. The interview was comprised of pre-developed questions that were asked over a one-hour interval. Questions were designed to be open-ended and were designed to elicit responses to analyze the impact of the NJ ASK4 testing on instructional and assessment practices. The first question was designed to engage all the focus group members (Rea & Parker, 2005). It was relatively simple and asked the participant to evoke a feeling to engage them in participation.

Questions were asked in an informal manner in order to develop trust and rapport with the participants. In order to elicit thoughtful, adequate responses silent probes, overt encouragement, elaboration, clarification, and repetition were used

(Trochim, 2006). The use of probes was recorded by the researcher when used (Rea & Parker, 2005).

The rest of the questions were asked. With each question, responses from the group were invited and discussed among the group until the researcher determined that it was time to move forward. Following each question, the researcher summarized the views expressed and obtained some consensus (Rea & Parker, 2005).

At the conclusion of the focus group session, the researcher briefly summarized the overall discussion, asked for further comments, and thanked the participants. A stamped, addressed envelope to the researcher was distributed to the participants to provide any additional information. Participants were notified that a summary of the results would be mailed to them and would be told when they should expect it.

Background Information on Participants

Three separate focus groups comprised of fourth grade teachers from three different Bergen County School districts with a District Factor Group of I were used in the study. Eighteen fourth grade teachers participated in the study. Fifteen were female, three were male.

District 1 had six teachers participate, district 2 had five teachers participate, and district 3 had seven teachers participate. Each district had one male in the group. Nine teachers were in the 22-30 age range group, four were in the 31-40 age range group, three were in the 41-50 age range group, one was in the over 50 age range group, and one did not respond.

Total years teaching ranged from 1 to 29 years with a mean of 7.83 years.

TABLE 6

Demographics of Subjects - Total Years Teaching

Total Years Teaching	1	2	3	5	6	7	8	9	10	21	29
Number of Subjects	1	2	1	4	2	2	1	1	2	1	1

Total years teaching fourth grade ranged from 1 to 20 years with a mean of 6 years.

TABLE 7

Demographics of Subjects - Total Years Teaching Fourth Grade

Total Years Teaching	2	3	5	6	7	8	9	10	13	20
Number of Subjects	1	3	3	2	1	1	1	1	1	1

Jury of Experts

The jury of experts consisted of three fourth grade teachers, one principal, and one school superintendent from two Bergen County Schools with a District Factor Group of I. Each person was given a document stating the title of the research proposal, the purpose of the research, and the five research questions. Additionally, each was provided with the script for the focus group interview and a table aligning the research questions with the questions asked during the interview.

The jury of experts were asked to carefully scrutinize the questions to analyze if they answered the researcher's questions and were aligned with the purpose of the study. Each person was asked to review this information at their leisure and to let the researcher know when they were done evaluating the tool. After sufficient time was given, the researcher met individually with each person to discuss their suggestions.

The consensus from the jury of experts was that the focus group interview questions were aligned with the research questions and the purpose of the study. They felt that the twenty questions could easily be covered in the one hour time frame

and were well thought out and written. Other than a few minor changes in grammatical context, no major changes were suggested. All expressed a great interest in learning the results of the researcher's study.

Data Collection

The researcher conducted three focus group interviews in three school districts in Bergen County New Jersey with a District Factor Grouping of I. Open-ended questions were asked and volunteers were instructed to listen to the questions and answer freely giving everyone an opportunity to respond. A conversational tone with dialogue and interaction among respondents was encouraged. Volunteers were also encouraged to add additional information as other respondents answered questions and more thoughts were evoked. The researcher kept the dialogue pertinent and answers focused by using verbal and non-verbal probes to elicit response from the volunteers. The researcher explained that she was there to listen and learn from them and their experiences. Two tape recorders recorded the interaction among the group members. The transcribed discussions were then used for the data analysis.

Data Analysis

"Qualitative analysis transforms data into findings" (Patton, 2002). Data analysis becomes making sense of the world through synthesis and evaluation. The challenge then becomes making sense of the data and identifying significant patterns

researcher's analytical thought process and no straight forward test that can be applied for reliability and validity.

In the survey instrument, specific questions were asked in different ways to elicit responses to specific research questions. Tables 1 through 5 provide an overview of the research questions and their alignment with the questions asked in the instrument. Questions 1, 2, 3, 15, and 16 pertain to research question 1 to solicit data to as to how fourth grade teachers perceive the NJ ASK4 as an effective tool for the assessment of fourth grade students. The question route responses for 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 15, and 16 pertain to research question 2 to solicit data on how fourth grade teachers perceive the NJ ASK4 as having any effect on their instructional methods. The question route responses to 12, 13, and 14 pertain to research question 3 to solicit data on how fourth grade teachers perceive the NJ ASK4 as having any effect on their assessment practices. The question route responses for 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 16 pertain to research question 4 to solicit data on whether fourth grade teachers perceive pressure from outside sources in preparing students for the NJ ASK test. If pressure is perceived, to what extent has it affected instructional and assessment practices. The question route responses to 4, 11, 14, 15, and 16 pertain to research question 5 to solicit data on how fourth grade teachers and school districts are using the information gained by the NJ ASK4 testing.

The researcher clustered the respondents' answers from each of the three districts by question route responses as identified in tables 1 through 5 in order to unearth common patterns and themes across districts. Chapter 4 contains a discussion of the findings.

Summary

With the approval from the Institutional Review Board, the researcher conducted three focus group interviews compromised of eighteen fourth grade teachers from Bergen County Schools with a District Factor Grouping of I, to determine their perceptions of the New Jersey ASK4 testing on their instructional and assessment practices. The questions were test piloted by a jury of experts that consisted of three fourth grade teachers, one principal, and one superintendent from Bergen County School Districts with a District Factor Grouping of I. The pilot group members were not associated with or were part of the focus groups. All members conceded that the questions were aligned with the researcher's topic, were well stated, and answered the research questions.

The researcher then analyzed the written transcripts from the three focus group interviews looking for common themes, patterns, and nuances that would help depict underlying feelings and perceptions about how teachers' felt the NJ ASK4 testing has affected their instructional and assessment practices. "Description forms the bedrock of all qualitative reporting" (Patton, 2002). From the descriptions careful interpretations explaining the findings, attaching significance to particular results, and putting patterns into an analytical framework are completed. The transcripts from the three focus group interviews are included in Appendix B. A discussion of the research findings are in Chapter IV.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to analyze the impact of the NJ ASK4 testing on the instructional and assessment practices of fourth grade teachers to help policy makers and educators make well-informed decisions about accountability systems and their impact on instructional and assessment practices. By identifying desirable and undesirable practices, methods can be recommended to increase best practices in the classroom. The methodology and the interpretive outcomes in the study contribute to the growing literature base on the effects of high-stakes tests.

Qualitative measures were utilized in this study to capture the feelings and attitudes of fourth grade teachers. This study demanded a qualitative approach because teachers are the key actors that must translate high accountability tests into instructional and assessment activities. A structured interview protocol consisting of questions about instruction and assessment was utilized for the study. The interviewer asked follow-up questions and clarified responses to make certain the meanings of the respondents were understood. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The responses of each group are clustered together by research question in order to synthesize common themes and patterns. The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. How do fourth grade teachers perceive the NJ ASK4 as an effective tool for the assessment of fourth grade students?
2. How do fourth grade teachers perceive the NJ ASK4 as having any effect on their instructional methods?
3. How do fourth grade teachers perceive the NJ ASK4 as having any effect on their assessment practices?
4. Do fourth grade teachers perceive pressure from outside sources in preparing students for the NJ ASK4 test? If pressure is perceived, to what extent has it affected instructional and assessment practices?
5. How are fourth grade teachers and school districts using the information gained by the NJ ASK4?

Analysis of Discussions

Research Question 1

How do fourth grade teachers perceive the NJ ASK4 as an effective tool for the assessment of fourth grade students?

The responses from questions 1, 2, 3, 15 and 16 (see Appendix A and B) from the question route pertain to research question 1. When asked question 1, “How does the ASK4 testing make you feel?” from the question route; 9 said they were stressed, 3 felt overwhelmed, 2 said annoyed, 1 felt rushed, 1 felt aggravated, and 1 frustrated (One subject did not respond because they arrived late.)

The highest generated feeling was stressed. Respondents felt stressed for a variety of reasons:

- (a) There is a limited amount of time to cover material on the test, to explain the format, and to cover the rest of the curriculum especially in mathematics.
- (b) There is a large amount of material to cover from September to March.
- (c) They felt that their teaching ability is looked at by how well students are prepared and their performance is reflective of the teacher's ability.
- (d) The scores are published in the paper.

The second highest generated feeling was overwhelmed. Respondents felt overwhelmed because they felt that there is a lot of curriculum that needs to be covered that would normally be taught at the end of the year. As one respondent said, "It's too much to have to deal with by March."

Annoyed was the next highest generated response. These teachers felt annoyed because they felt the test affected their time management. "I think it's a waste of time and I think there's so many other important things that we could be teaching our kids instead of wasting all of our instructional time on teaching to the test." Another teacher expressed, "I think it really hinders what actually goes on in the classroom and what should go on in the classroom because you're basically teaching to the test."

The last three feelings; rushed, aggravated, and frustrated generated the same number of responses. One teacher felt rushed because you have to expose the students to so many different topics. Another felt aggravated because the testing company has been given feedback in the past and has not taken any of the suggestions

into consideration. And finally, another felt frustrated because there is a lot to cover in a short amount of time.

Overwhelmingly, many teachers concluded negative feelings toward the test. One teacher suggested, "I think perhaps if the test was pushed back a little bit, I may not feel as stressed." Another teacher said,

In some districts they expect you to teach a lot to the test although they may not say that you're teaching to the test. So you have to do that on top of curriculum or integrated with curriculum and it becomes appalling.

Another concluded,

Whether you say you don't teach to the test or you do, it's just, you stop basically your flow, and I can just judge by the way I feel after the test to know that this is an accurate... you know after the test is over you just feel relieved like you can get back to teaching and being with the kids and that sort of thing.

Question 2 asked "Overall, how do you perceive the ASK4 as an effective assessment tool for fourth grade students?" six out of the 18 respondents thought the ASK4 was a fair assessment. The other 12 respondents did not respond negatively, but all respondents made recommendations for improvements.

Suggestions for improvement included changing the time of year in which the test is given. Many felt that the scores are skewed based on the March test date.

If they had the entire year then it would be similar to other assessments that are given as far as how do you perform throughout the year. So even though it's still a testing situation and not every child is going to perform well on

tests, you might get better performance if it's not compacted into a shorter time period.

Respondents from District 2 felt that the math scores were over inflated and the language arts/literacy scores were under inflated. The reason they suggested for the lowered writing scores was,

The language kind of lacks, because how we teach language is we go through process pieces of writing. We take a week. We take two weeks if not more. And on this test, the kids are expected to do everything in 25 minutes and give their best. And I think that's not really a true assessment about how they really write. When they're under a time constraint it really limits them and they don't have time to go back and revise or edit and look at their work again. It's really a one-shot deal. Done. Gone.

In District 3 teachers felt the same way expressing,

I think authentic assessment is for children to learn to do what writers do. And so we've been teaching the writing process and as a process... and in 25 minutes they have to plop down a writing sample and they're not allowed to use reference materials, and they are not allowed to use their dictionaries and thesauruses, and you're not allowed to ask someone to proofread it. And I get, I get the not asking anyone else to proofread it, feedback thing. That part I get. But the 25 minutes from soup to nuts is such an injustice to the kids in our school district who have been learning this process for a very long time and by fourth grade are mystified that it no longer matters. I think it just sends the wrong message to the child.

Another problem teachers identified was when they received them. Usually students were in fifth grade by the time the teacher's received the scores. As one teacher expressed, "So it doesn't help us, to help them when they're with us."

Several had concerns about including special education students in the testing population. One teacher articulated,

I think that it's a pretty effective measure for regular education students. But my biggest concern about the test is the effectiveness for the students with special needs. I don't think it's the best way to assess those children. And I have a little girl in my class and I don't know how she would even be able to answer half the questions on the test. I think that it's a waste of her time. And I think it's unnecessary for her to have to go through something like that. It's not a way to test her progress.

Another teacher gave this example,

I have a boy who did not write at all on and NJ ASK. Nothing. And he has special needs and it was a total waste of his time. He didn't write anything for short answers, for reading, for language arts, for science, math, nothing. He could only do the multiple choice. So that's not an effective measure of his knowledge because he can't do the writing. Even though he knows it, he can't express what he knows. So, you know, for that population of kids, I totally agree. It's really stressful for them too and they get really upset. And they don't know what to do. And they can't do it. So I don't think that it's fair for them. It doesn't really show what they know.

For the most part teachers though it was a fair assessment but modifications could be made for improvement. Suggestions included giving the ASK4 test in May or June, increasing the time for the writing section, getting the scores back to teachers sooner, and excluding special education students as part of the testing population.

Question 3 from the question route asked, "If you had the power to do so, what would you add or delete from the test to make it a more effective assessment tool?" Suggestions included removing the science section, having the test later in the year (May or June) in order to cover all the topics, or only testing curriculum topics up to March, reduce the one hour time limit of the reading passages, increase the time of the writing samples from 25 minutes to 45/60 minutes, and to not print the scores in the paper.

One teacher suggested that science should be removed. "I think if you're really assessing a student's math and reading and language arts ability, that's fine. But in fourth grade, I really don't find it necessary that you have to see, know what they know in science."

Another teacher suggested that the test should be later in the year.

Like it goes back to the first question you asked... feeling rushed and trying to cover so much. But if we didn't have to...I mean there is so much we have to cover up to March. If that was covered on the New Jersey ASK, you could still see a student's thought process and the way they're thinking and the way they're learning.

Another suggested,

If there was some kind of statewide curriculum that said up to this point, right before the testing, every child in fourth grade in New Jersey should know this... Because what we're teaching here is different from what somebody else is teaching. So their kids have the ups on some things and the not so high on the other things. And if that's what they want, they should tell us by this point, this is what your child, your children, should have learned.

Another teacher expressed concern over the Math section.

I think the testing should be pushed back a little bit. This is supposed to be a true assessment of fourth grade and yet in math we don't nearly cover or teach what is supposed to be on this test, so therefore as the test gets closer we're stressed because we know that there's going to be questions on the test that pertain to things we have not taught yet. Because it's a simple progression of how fourth grade goes so... I think it's not a true assessment in some cases because they don't even learn the stuff yet.

The timing of certain sections was felt to be inaccurate. One suggestion was for increased time for the writing pieces. As one teacher mentioned, "Twenty-five minutes is not enough time to compose a piece, revise, proofread, and make it a better piece. We've always said that. That should be a longer piece. It's something that they never did." Once suggestion was to increase the time from 25 minutes to 45/60 minutes. Another suggestion was to reduce the time for the reading passages.

...they give them so much time for that section. They give them almost an hour... and they are done within 20 minutes and they have to sit there for a

half-hour. When the writing section, they give you 25 minutes and the kids are cramming. So I think the time constraints need to be fixed.

One teacher suggested not printing the scores in the paper. Her reason,

I think that's a huge problem. I think when a person gets voted on to the board because they're going to bring everyone in our district to be advanced proficient it's a bit of a mindset where... what do you think was in the water when you had your children that they're all so brilliant? And why is proficient no longer good?

And one last note,

There seems to be some kind of equation with the more money a district is deemed to have, the more it is up the alphabet on the scale of districts, the more brilliant the children should be. And so I would like to see that changed as well.

Question 15 from the question route asked, "How and when are the results from the ASK4 given to you?" For this question each district received the results at different times and handled the data differently.

The teachers in District 1 receive their scores in June and the parents are mailed the scores over the summer. They receive the entire fourth grade scores but usually only look at their own students. As one teacher expressed, "...frankly I look at them for five minutes and I say great that's how they did and I put them somewhere else and it's not that huge of a deal." They were not sure what data they received from the ASK4 other than a number. They thought they received the same score reports as the parents but it's not broken down into specific skills. For that kind of

data the district developed their own pre and posttest. They felt their test breaks down skills better so they use that data to guide their teaching. Their director of curriculum usually gives them a spreadsheet at the beginning of the year that has last year's ASK3 scores on it. The ASK4 data would be given to fifth grade teachers.

District 2 wasn't sure when the data arrived. They believed it was in the summer. One teacher said, "...we don't see those scores and put them to use." Another teacher said, "I see them when they're in fifth grade." And another, "I feel like the first time I really get to see them is when they're in a newspaper." In one school the principal provides an analysis on overheads at faculty meetings in the beginning of the year. This principal also requires the staff to develop spreadsheets to be brought to building team meetings that include 4th grade Terra Nova scores from the fall, ASK3 scores, 4th grade holistic scores, and 3rd grade cognitive scores. Faculty meetings were utilized the previous year to train teachers in using the database. One teacher said,

I don't know what we have done with it other than to go oooh you got all E's or oooh... I think the goal is that to say, Ok, your group happens to have a larger percentage of not proficient then you would get more support and that kind of thing would develop. But I don't think we really have taken it and gone anywhere with it, just more for reporting.

In the other two schools the math and reading specialist provide an analysis of the data.

District 3 teachers have to request the scores in September. The parents get the results before they do. They do not believe they get the same breakdown as the

parents. They receive a printout of the students' names and scores sorted from advanced proficient down. As for the data they receive, one teacher expressed concern, "Like in the picture or poetry prompt it will say whatever they got four out of eight, but you don't know within it what they did wrong." Administration gives them the ASK3 from last year and has them highlight the students that are close to being advanced proficient so they can push them to the next level. And how are they getting them to the next level? One teacher said, "We are just making sure those children get special attention from us."

The last question from the question route, question 16, that addresses research question 1 asked, "How is the data from the ASK4 used in your district? The three districts that were interviewed used it for math placement, to flag students for basic skills, for placement in gifted and talented programs, and to identify students close to the advanced proficient range in order to push them to the next level.

I felt one teacher summed up to what extent everyone felt the ASK4 was an effective assessment tool for fourth grade,

I think what makes something a good assessment is the feedback you get from something to improve the kids. That's basically the goal of an assessment.

What do we get from the ASK? We get nothing but a number....Where the ASK is, just in my opinion, is just a tool for state monitoring and state report cards and things like that. So as an assessment tool I think it's horrible in that we don't have anything to grow from because of it.

Research Question 2

How do fourth grade teachers perceive the NJ ASK4 as having any effect on their instructional methods?

The responses from questions 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 15, and 16 (see Appendix A and B) from the question route pertain to research question 2.

Question 5 from the question route asked, “What materials do you possess that help students prepare for the ASK4? Who purchased them? Each district had different materials that they utilized to prepare students for the ASK4. District 1 had literacy and mathematics workbooks and had developed packets that were used prior to testing to familiarize students to mathematical concepts. These teachers were also given professional development time to develop center activities. One teacher explained, “I think it’s a combination of things that we got from outside places, things we’ve put together through professional development time, and then things that were purchased for us.” Districts 2 and 3 had workbooks and also used the practice component that came with their math series. Teachers from all three districts had input into what was developed or purchased.

Question 6 from the question route asked, “How do you prepare students for the test? Teachers said they tried to get students familiar with the format. “For me it was very important for them to see what each section of the test would look like,” expressed one teacher. Getting them used to timed situations, following directions, writing to picture prompts was shared by all. As one teacher said,

I always start with following directions. You know, that’s one underlying theme that seems the whole test is on, direction following. And that’s

something that I think that no matter what subject it is they have to be able to read and do what's required of them.

One concern a teacher had was, "We do steer away from our regular curriculum...I love to say that's not teaching towards the test but in way it is."

As for when practicing begins, there was a consensus between all three districts that practice in writing to picture prompts within a 25 minute time period begins in September and gets more intense as the test approaches. One teacher explained, "The graphic organizers we start in September and we kind of work through the different writing formats."

In mathematics all three districts did math moments, spiral reviews, or warm-ups starting in September and leading up to the test. Additionally, one district developed practice packets that are started ten weeks prior to the test that covered all math concepts taught on the ASK4. All teachers felt that from January through March was the greatest push for math practice in order to cover all the topics.

Question 7 from the question route asked, "Approximately how many classroom hours would you say you spend preparing students for the ASK4?" District 1 spends approximately 120 minutes per day during their reading/language arts and math blocks but not explicitly on practicing to the test. One teacher clarified,

I mean as much as we say that period from January to March is intensive to the test, we have so much time to plan out together. We're given time over the summer to work together. We planned it out in a way that we incorporated strategies and techniques into other content areas. So the kids whether it's a science packet, you know, when they're switching for science...

or a social studies skill... I feel like they're learning the questioning techniques that are specific to the reading/language arts portion in those other content areas. So there's not such a push. We still do creative things like literature circles... and different more expressive strategies I guess you call them...that's what I'm looking for and were not just teaching to a test because we know it's coming. And I feel the same thing in math. I mean we're doing hands-on creative lessons, but then the kids have to see the flipside that there are certain questions or certain written expectations that go along with those fun hands-on activities.

District 2 and 3 integrate practice for the test up until January. For writing one teacher explained,

Just teaching across the curriculum that when they write their answers I always make them write everything in complete sentences... use part of the question in their answer, so they are used to it whether they are doing science or social studies. So it's like part of their writing.

Both districts agreed that there is a large focus on practicing for the test from January until testing. District 2 felt that health and science teaching time is reduced during this period. District 3 said that about half the day was spent practicing for the test during this period.

Question 8 from the question route asked, "Describe how your teach today and how it is similar or different than how you've taught in the past." Some teachers did not feel their teaching had changed. But as one teacher explained,

I don't think my goals for the students or the way I structure my lessons has changed because of the test, but I think the vocabulary choices that I make. You know I'm exposing to the kids across the content areas to more vocabulary that might appear. I think that's something that I've definitely done more of. And also expecting them to include written expression in math.

Another teacher felt that her teaching style hadn't changed but her assessment had grown.

I might include a few more questions that might be similar to those that are asked on the New Jersey ASK. I actually do think that the way that they're assessing students' thinking process is effective, because of the written expression.

In another district a teacher had changed grade levels and expressed concern that the pressure from the test didn't allow you to do fun things. "In fourth grade it didn't really lend itself to those (fun) things when you have to stop and use test prep materials. So I feel like the stress involved and just the fun of the activities changed a little bit." Other teachers said that before the test there was more project based and hands-on teaching. Once the test is over they felt that they could get back to fun activities.

Just giving them time to figure out a math problem on a board just by trial and error with a group of kids. Instead of rushing to show them the algorithm, because God forbid it might be on the test. You can't do that. Instead you have to say, "Listen when you see this, do this. And when you see that, this is

what you should do.” It was just kind of pumping them into being little robots.

Another teacher expressed concern that over the years more pressure has been perceived.

I feel like when I first started teaching fourth grade it was a little bit more laid back with testing. I feel like over the course of seven years that it’s every year become more pressure, more pressure, and more pressure. More books, more resources, more teaching, start earlier, everyday. So I think as I’ve moved along here, the pressure was put on. Even more so each year.

A suggestion from one teacher was that the math section shouldn’t cover the entire year. She suggested that it should just cover the first half of the year so you could teach at a normal pace.

Question 9 from the question route asked, “Overall how many hours per week do you spend teaching each subject area? Districts 1, 2 and 3 responded respectively in minutes: math 40, 75, 60; language arts/ reading 80, 90, 90; science 40 minutes four days a week, 45 twice a week, 40 minutes every other day; social studies 40 minutes every day, 45 minutes three times a week, 40 minutes every other day.

Question 10 from the question route asked, “Has that amount always been the same or has that changed over time? District 1 saw an adjustment when they changed from being departmentalized. Now they teach in the same classroom all day. District 2 saw an increase in math from 45 minutes to an hour. District 3 saw a reduction of 20 minutes in math and 45 minutes in language arts. The times were reduced because they didn’t fit into the school schedule and would have required an increase in staff.

Question 11 from the question route asked, “To what extent has the ASK4 influenced your instruction?” Teachers from district 1 felt that it hadn’t influenced their instruction. Teachers from districts 2 and 3 felt that it had. One teacher said,

You stop what you're doing, right before the test and you have to you know, drill poetry prompts and picture prompts, and I think that it stops the flow of whatever you're really doing.

And another stated, “It takes away from the quality of what you’re teaching.”

And finally another, “You’re more robotic.” One teacher was concerned about how stressed the kids today are about the test. She remarked,

You know it’s funny. I was talking about getting mixed messages before. I could be sending them mixed messages. You know I’m telling them it’s not a big deal and relax, and then I’m flinging a book at them and we’re spending an hour doing it.

The responses to questions 15 and 16 have already been analyzed in research question 1. A summary of how the respondents’ answers relate to research question 2 follows.

The respondents did not believe that the data from the ASK 4 effected their instruction. Several teachers were confused as to when the data actually came in. Some teachers received their scores in June while others had to request them in September. The data labels students into three categories by a numerical score. The categories are labeled: not proficient, proficient, or advanced proficient. A breakdown of subcategories of the test was not provided so teachers could not analyze where improvements needed to be made. Additionally by receiving the data

at the end of the school year or at the beginning of the following year, teachers were not able to assist students that were labeled as not proficient. Most districts had developed their own pre and posttest that teachers utilized to analyze their classroom effectiveness. Across the three districts, the ASK4 data was used only for math placement, to flag students for basic skills, for placement in gifted and talented programs, and to identify students close to the advanced proficient level in order to give them extra attention to push them to the next level.

Research Question 3

How do fourth grade teachers perceive the NJ ASK4 as having any effect on their assessment practices?

The responses from questions 12, 13 and 14 (see Appendix A and B) from the question route pertain to research question 3.

Question 12 asked, “Suppose I was a student teacher assigned to your classroom. What types of assessment tools would I see being used in your classroom?”

Assessment tools used in the three districts included more written expression in math and language, multiple choice, true/false, open-ended, and short answer questions, holistic scoring using rubrics, writing prompts, peer assessments, and self assessments. The teachers in all three districts felt that assessment choices that they made were not based on the ASK4 testing. As one teacher said, “It’s not because of the test that we have chosen to do anything specific.” Many felt that it was more based on using a variety of assessments in the classroom. As another teacher explained, “They get enough with their prep books.”

Question 13 asked, “Look back to when you started teaching. How have your assessment techniques changed? Some teachers suggested that since they started teaching they do more writing in math, more authentic assessments, more multiple choice questions, and less essays. One teacher who has been teaching for 29 years said,

That's pretty funny. I started in 78, and everything was multiple choice, fill in the blank, word bank, two essays at the end. It was very lockstep. And then in the beginning of the 80s they really enforced centers. Even the older kids, and ours were at a Montessori school at the time, it was more portfolios, taped conversations with our students, let them pick a sample of their favorite work, explain why it's their favorite work and I would say since the NJASK we're reverting back to a little bit more of that multiple choice, fill in the blank, kind of thing. At least for me, I don't spend as much time...I can't tell you the last time I tape recorded one of my kids.

Another teacher who had experience teaching third grade that did not have high-stakes testing at the time explained it this way,

I think, like you said in third grade, I assessed kids more on making story maps and there was a lot of maybe being assessed on group activities, group work, oral presentations, scores, things like that and I don't do as much of that in fourth grade as I did in third. I just, I just don't feel there is... I just don't have the time for it. It just doesn't fit into the...that testing procedure.

Toward the end of the year I do those kinds of things, which is why I enjoy

once the test is over. You know, it's kind of I like the test earlier because then I have more of the year to have fun afterwards.

Another teacher felt that the teachers in her school "try to vary the assessments" to get kids prepared for different levels. And a teacher from another district added, "I think we use a variety of assessments and always really have... to appeal to every different learner in your classroom."

Question 14 from the question route asked, "To what extent has the ASK4 influenced your assessment? District 1 felt that it hadn't. One teacher made clear,

We are provided with so much opportunities to understand different learners and differentiate so that lends itself to what we do with the New Jersey ASK.

I worked in a district before where I didn't have the support that I have here.

It was a very different income and everything else as far as the district I was in and unfortunately you kind of see the effect of what's available to you. You know the more workshops are available to help you differ your question techniques and your strategies in the classroom, the stronger you're going to be with the kids, I think.

Another teacher explained it this way,

I think one thing that we've all been able to do here is to relieve some of that pressure and let the kids go in there and take the test and do what they're going to do. If they do great, they do great. If not, you figure out, you know, how to help them. I think attitude has a lot to do with it as well.

In District 2 they felt that they used their assessment to get students familiar to the test.

I think I try to get them, to get them ready to know what they're lacking in or what they need to improve on, or what they're doing really well... I think I focus my assessment on so they know what to do well for the ASK test kind of thing. I would say if this is on the ASK you would be getting a four point or a three point here because this was missing. Or you got four points here because that was, you know, you used this. I try to give them those types of clues.

In District 3 they felt that they used their assessments to give students practice so it was not unfamiliar to them but they expressed that it wasn't the only way they assessed a child. They felt that their instruction was more affected than their assessment practices by the ASK4 test.

Research Question 4

Do fourth grade teachers perceive pressure from outside sources in preparing students for the ASK4 test? If pressure is perceived, to what extent has it affected instructional and assessment practices?

The responses from questions 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 16 (see Appendix A and B) from the question route pertain to research question 4.

Question 4 asked, "There is great pressure put on administrators to increase scores. How do administrators in your district specifically address student performance on this test? Please acknowledge individuals by title only. District 1 does not feel any pressure from administration. They feel the pressure is more external. "I think the pressure comes more from the parents and the community, specifically with the scores, because a lot of the parents are wondering where their

math placement will be moving into the middle school.” They feel that administration is very confident in their abilities and believes in the teaching staff. The pressure is not high, but the expectation to get good scores is there.

I think we’re let known in subtle ways...we had workshops on differentiated instruction and at the start of the workshops this year, scores were gone on over in great detail as far as the assessment of where the kids did, what specific content areas, you know, grade levels or classes that needed to be worked on without pointing out the individual. But the workshops were given. We were given time, which we felt very fortunate, for professional development days to work together in our planning for the curriculum. How we were going to align the test dates this year. So we are given flexibility and team planning time to work with one another so we can set up for that. So, I think the expectation is there. And if we are being given that time, we are being given the resources, but the pressure isn’t intense.

They felt that there is more of a support system in their school and confidence is shared between administration and staff.

In District 2 one principal brings the graphs and data to faculty meetings to have the staff analyze it.

We analyze it and look for areas that need to be improved and we have to go back to previous grade levels that aren’t even tested for the ASK and see what we may be doing to help bring up the scores in third, fourth and fifth grades.

They complained about having too many resources given to them. One teacher expressed, it was, “overwhelming beyond belief.” They also expressed concern that

their scores were never good enough. One year they had all great scores, “And we were pretty excited with ourselves, doing a good job...and well your advanced proficient weren’t so good.” “Right, and going back to the stress thing, it’s kinda never good enough. Regardless if it’s all hundreds.”

In District 3 board members ran on the platform to get everyone in the advanced proficient range. But one teacher with knowledge of statistics said,

It doesn’t make sense though, because in a normal bell curve, which you learn in college, take a statistic course anywhere, you have the partial proficient, proficient, and advanced proficient. The norm should be proficient in the middle. So you shouldn’t, I mean, yes (inaudible) the whole No Child Left Behind with President Bush... It’s impossible to expect those partially proficient students to all be advanced...that’s whose there...that’s part of the population. You’re always going to have that. Yes, you’d like to see them improve but you are always going to have some that are partial, most who are proficient, and the top end of the scale will be advanced proficient. So you can move a little farther along but you’re always going to have that. So, it doesn’t make sense to me in the first place that everyone would be proficient or advanced proficient. That’s not reality.

They also felt subliminal pressure from the superintendent. One teacher gave an example of what has been said in the past. The superintendent said, “I know you guys are doing the best you can. Don’t worry about anything, but the scores have to be higher. It’s not that we care, but we’re an I district. Don’t worry about anything, but bring the scores up.” Suggestions to improve performance on the test by the

superintendent including giving teachers a practice book that was 500 pages long in January, reduce teaching time in science and social studies, and having the teachers teach more figurative language. There was no pressure felt from the principal.

One year they were sent to workshops “because we obviously didn’t know what we were doing.” “We had 25% of our population that year (in special education). So they all sat us down and said, what do you think happened to the fourth grade test? Nothing. You know?” One teacher summarized it like this,

I think he makes the parents crazy over nothing because they are hearing it at board meetings and as they get into kindergarten... and they don’t have an older child... their first reaction, as I would expect it to be is, “Oh, my gosh! On my gosh! What should I be doing? Should I be sending my son for extra courses? Should I be tutoring? I tutor kids specifically to pass the NJASK as if that was going to get them into Princeton someday.

The responses to questions 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 16 have already been analyzed in previous research questions. A summary of the analysis of how the respondents’ answers relate to research question 4 follows.

Pressure from outside sources has led teachers to alter their instruction in their classroom by focusing instruction on test preparation. Teachers complained that the testing made them more robotic. The time period between January through March was reported as being the most intense. The regular curriculum is ignored and more time is spent in the tested areas of reading, language arts, and mathematics. In language arts there is practice writing to picture prompts in the 25-minute time period starting in September, but practicing gets more intense starting in January.

Additionally, in mathematics spiral reviews, warm-ups, and math moments are started in September but gets more intense starting in January. One district even developed math packets that were started ten-weeks prior to testing to review and teach math concepts. Practice workbooks were purchased in all the districts to use in the classroom. All teachers expressed they had input into what was developed or purchased.

During this test preparation period between January through March health, social studies, and science teaching time is reduced. One district said they spend about half the day on practicing for the test. The overall time spent teaching subject areas did not appear to change over the years although most teachers were not teaching in this grade level prior to high-stakes tests being integrated. As one teacher had remarked, “It’s all I’ve ever known.”

Two districts, district 2 and 3 felt that the ASK4 had influenced their instruction. The researcher would argue that district 1, did change their instruction but didn’t recognize it as so.

Teachers did not identify pressure from outside sources or the test itself influencing their assessment. Teachers used multiple assessment tools to address all learners. These tools included peer and self-assessment. They also formatted questions as true/false, open-ended, and short answer so they were similar to the ASK4 questions. Written expression in mathematics was utilized more frequently. Picture prompts and writing prompts were used for language arts assessment. Teachers also used holistic scoring rubrics similar to the ASK4 to assess the writing.

The researcher would argue that assessment has been influenced and choices are selected based on the ASK4 test.

Only two teachers identified that their assessment techniques had changed over time. One teacher had been teaching for 29 years. She deducted that her assessment has come full circle. She started in the 70's by assessing with multiple choice, fill-in the blanks and essays. Then her assessments evolved to include centers, portfolios, and taped conversations. Now she feels she's back to the multiple choice/essay format. Another teacher had switched from a grade that did not have a high-stakes test. In the previous grade level the teacher had assessed students on more child-centered activities like oral presentations and group activities. Now the teacher waits until after the testing to do these types of "fun" assessments.

Research Question 5

How are fourth grade teachers and school districts using the information gained by the NJ ASK4?

The responses from questions 4, 11, 14, 15, and 16 (see Appendix A and B) from the question route pertain to research question 5. The have already been analyzed in previous research questions. A summary of the analysis of how the respondents' answers relate to research question 5 follows.

Many teachers were unaware of when the data from the ASK4 was received in their district. Some believed it came at the end of the year, while others said they had to ask their principal for the information in September. One teacher felt that the first time he saw the information was in the newspaper. The data received from the ASK4 includes categorizing students into three groups based on a numerical score.

The categories are not proficient, proficient, and advanced proficient. Data from the ASK4 is utilized to identify students for basic skills, math placement, placement into gifted programs, and to identify students that are close to advanced proficient in order to push them to the next level. Most districts used this score as only one indicator of student progress and use the data in graphs or tables as one component to view student progress.

There is pressure on teachers to push proficient students into the advanced proficient range but no instructional practices were identified to accomplish this task. Pressure was generated from several sources but was dependent on individual districts. Community members, Superintendents, Board Members, and Principals have all exerted pressure. Some of this pressure is subliminal and some intentional. In face of the pressure from the stakeholders, teachers' instructional and assessment practices have been altered leading to desirable and undesirable consequences.

Analysis of Qualitative Research

The researcher conducted three in-depth discussion groups with fourth grade teachers to analyze teachers' perceptions of the NJ ASK4 and its impact on instructional and assessment practices. Identical questions were asked following a prescribed question route. Responses were recorded, transcribed, and elaboration was asked when clarification was needed. The responses of each group were clustered together by research question in order to synthesize common themes and patterns.

Certain themes and patterns emerged from the discussion and are outlined in Figures 1 through 6 in Chapter V. Some common themes that emerged were: (a) fourth grade teachers thought the ASK4 was a fair assessment tool, but improvements

are needed to make it more effective and less stressful, (b) the ASK4 test led to both desirable and undesirable practices in instruction, (c) although not identified by all fourth grade teachers, the ASK4 has led to changed practices in assessment all considered desirable by the teachers, (d) data is being utilized in effective and non-effective roles. A discussion of the research questions and the common themes and patterns are discussed in greater detail in Chapter V. They are noted here as part of the analysis.

It is important to note that the results reported here are from a limited sample of fourth grade teachers from three school districts. Furthermore, they represent only DFG I school districts, which is an indicator of district wealth. Caution should be exercised when generalizing to other educational settings.

CHAPTER V

SUMMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to analyze the impact of the ASK4 testing on the instructional and assessment practices of fourth grade teachers to help policy makers and educators make well-informed decisions about accountability systems and their impact on instructional and assessment practices. Specifically, this study sought to unearth common themes and patterns from research focus groups to gain a better understanding of whether the ASK4 has had any impact on fourth grade teachers' instructional and assessment practices. By identifying desirable and undesirable practices, methods could be recommended to increase best practices in the classroom. The study sought to determine if the findings unearthed are synonymous with other research findings on high-stakes testing. The interpretive outcomes in the study contribute to the growing literature base on the effects of high-stakes tests.

In Chapter I, the researcher presented an introduction to the study. This chapter presented the problem, the significance, and the purpose of the study. Research questions, limitations of the study, definitions of terms, and an overview of the study were included. Chapter II reviewed the related literature on high-stakes testing, external influences, test preparation, content and mode of instruction, assessment strategies, and the use and reporting of test results. Chapter III addressed

the methodology of the study. This chapter included an introduction, a discussion of the population, instrument design, research procedures, techniques for data collection, background on participants, pilot study results, data collection, and analysis. Chapter IV presented the research findings using a qualitative analysis. Research questions were clustered for the analysis and include quotes and comments by teachers in response to a predetermined question route. Common themes and patterns were discussed in the analysis. Chapter V presents a summary, the conclusions, implications of the study and recommendations for policy, practice, and research.

Summary of the Study

Research Question 1

Research question 1 asked, how do fourth grade teachers perceive the NJ ASK4 as an effective tool for the assessment of fourth grade students? Teachers in this study felt that the ASK4 was a fair assessment tool, but improvements are needed to make it more effective and less stressful (see Figure 1).

All teachers expressed negative emotions to the test. They used terms such as stressed, overwhelmed, annoyed, rushed, aggravated, and frustrated to describe how the test makes them feel. They expressed negative emotions because they believe that from September to March there is not enough time to cover the curriculum that is part of the CCCS that is assessed on the ASK4. They also felt their teaching ability is looked at by how well students are prepared and student performance is reflective of that ability. Many expressed relief after the testing so that they could get back to doing “fun” things with their students.

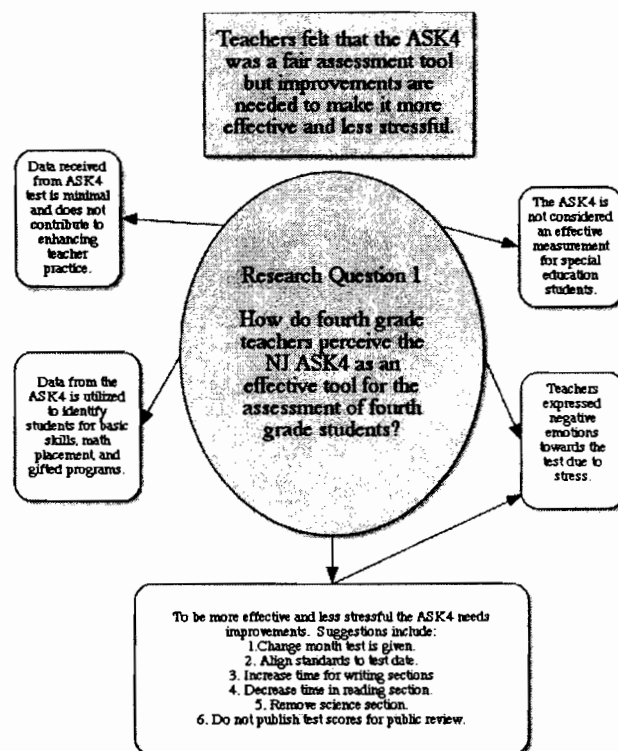


Figure 1. Analysis of Research Question 1

Emotional burnout is a concern that has been researched in previous studies. A quantitative cross-sectional study by Hanson (2006) examined legislated testing mandates in relation to burnout subscales, depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and personal accomplishment. The results showed a significant difference in emotional exhaustion from teachers in high-stakes versus low-stakes states. A concern since teacher burnout impedes job performance. Teachers in districts that have high-stakes tests like the ASK4 have experienced emotional exhaustion, which is consistent to the findings revealed in this study.

test scores, and inappropriate testing practices. He found what is lacking is a climate that focuses on improved learning rather than improved test performance.

Posner (2004) found that in many states, the quality of public education and the competence of teachers are being measured by scores on achievement tests.

Opponents claim that pressure makes teachers devote all their classroom time and resources to preparing students to do well on these tests. Something that is evident from this research as well. This has been phrased as “teaching to the test” a phrase commonly used by teachers interviewed for this study when describing their own teaching practices leading up to the test. Teachers’ perspectives on mandated teacher’s accountability and student testing policies indicate negative views particularly over tightened controls on instruction and interference in teaching practice (Wei, 2002).

Even though teachers’ in this study expressed negative feelings towards the ASK4, most thought it was a fair assessment. They wished that there could be improvements made to make it more effective and less stressful. Abrams (2004) also concluded that research has consistently shown that teachers have positive views of content standards and find they provide an instructional framework. Berliner & Nichols (2007) found in their study that although teachers were concerned about their loss of morale when it came to high-stakes tests they were not against accountability.

Suggestions to improve the ASK4 from this study include changing the month the test is given. The ASK4 assesses the entire curriculum that is taught in fourth grade from September through June. Currently, the ASK4 is given in March, which means teachers have to expose students to three months worth of curriculum that

hasn't been taught prior to the test being administered. They felt if the test was given in June that would relieve a lot of their stress. Another suggestion was to realign the CCCS to only include curriculum that is taught up to March. The CCCS could be realigned to assess curriculum from March of third grade to March of fourth grade.

The timing of certain sections of the test was felt to be out of alignment. Teachers felt that the writing sections weren't connected to how writing is taught, as a process. Instead the test requires students to write to a picture or poem prompt within a 25 minute time period. They felt that this was not enough time for fourth graders to write a cohesive essay. They thought that the time should be extended to be at least 45 to 60 minutes. Additionally they felt that the reading section in which students are asked to read a passage and answer multiple-choice questions was too long. The students completed this section in 20 minutes but are given 50-minutes to complete it. Teachers would like to see that time reduced.

Fourth grade teachers did not feel that the ASK4 was an effective measure of special education students. These students are required by law to take the test at the grade level in which they are enrolled even though their instructional level may be at a lower grade level. Several teachers gave examples of how their special education students could not handle the format and content of the test. They did not feel that it was an effective measure of that population and the inclusion of those scores in the grade level has lowered the overall score in language arts/literacy and mathematics in the past. These scores are published in the newspaper and the public is not aware that a lowered score from a previous year may be reflective of having more special education students in the population.

According to Jennings & Retner (2006) states and districts have repeatedly voiced frustrations over the requirements to administer state exams to students with cognitive disabilities or who speak limited or no English. Modifications that have been made are not deemed enough by most state officials or local educators.

Although the teachers felt the ASK4 was a fair assessment they didn't receive much feedback in terms of the data. Many did not know when they received the data. Some said they received it in June, others had to request that information in September from their principal.

The data received by administrators and teachers includes the assignment of a numerical score in mathematics, reading/language arts, and science to each student. That score identifies the student in one of three categories: not proficient, proficient, and advanced proficient. These scores have been used to identify students for basic skills, math, and gifted programs. They have also been used to identify students close to the advanced proficient range so teachers can help push them to the next level. Since the data is received so late, teachers felt that it did not assist them in helping students while they were still in their charge and did not help them identify areas they needed to improve upon in their instruction.

McMillan (2005) found that teachers made positive changes that emphasized depth in learning, higher-level cognition, collaboration, and more formative instruction when teachers received the data from high-stakes tests. In his research there appeared to be more of a change if teachers received this data in the summer or fall and it included the previous and current year's students. This research suggests

that teachers should have the ASK4 data made available to them so they can improve instruction.

Other suggestions teachers had included eliminating the science section, which they found not to be useful and for the test scores to not be published for public review. Pedulla (2003) also found that elementary teachers thought media reporting about state tests was not accurate and unfair to teachers and inaccurately portrayed the quality of education and the complexity of teaching.

Opponents of accountability systems say pressure leads to deleterious effects (McNeil, 2000). Past research suggests that pressure can lead to decontextualized test preparation and lead to didactic teaching practices (Smith, 1991; Cohen, 2001). Pressure encourages the use of didactic instruction more and generates very explicit test preparation activities. This does not vary by district wealth (Firestone, Monfils & Schorr, 2004). What is revealed in this study concurs with past research on high-stakes testing. Teachers view the ASK 4 as an effective tool but changes need to be made to eliminate the deleterious effects of the testing. The suggestions brainstormed by these groups could possibly make it a more effective tool.

Research Question 2

Research question 2 asked, how do fourth grade teachers' perceive the NJ ASK4 as having any effect on their instructional methods? Teachers in this study concluded that the ASK4 has affected their instructional methods in both desirable and undesirable ways (see Figure 2).

There were several desirable effects that teachers identified with instruction. First, they felt that the test emphasizes more written expression and this has affected

their instruction in mathematics. Instead of just writing an answer to a problem in math, they now require their students to explain how they arrived at an answer. This was viewed as a positive effect of the test. Although test preparation is not viewed positively, they felt that the way they integrate test preparation into their instruction starting in September is done so well it doesn't feel like they're teaching to the test. They also felt that they are exposing students to more vocabulary because of the testing. Their instruction time of 60 minutes to teach math and 90 minutes for language arts/literacy was felt to be a fair amount of time to be spending on those subject areas. Teachers also thought the use of the ASK4 data to identify students for basic skills, math placement, and gifted programs were fair.

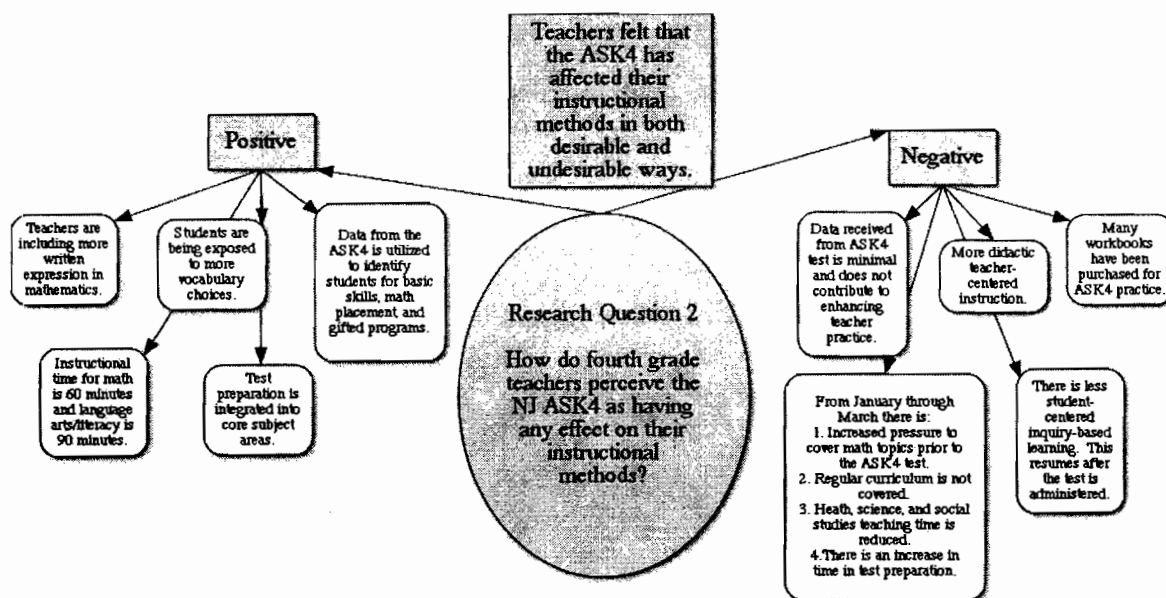


Figure 2. Analysis of Research Question 2

Many districts have mandated times for instruction. Jennings & Retner (2006) reported that sixty percent of the districts require a specific amount of time for reading in the elementary schools. A common finding (Abrams, 2004) is that

teachers report spending a greater amount of time in content areas on which students are assessed.

Taylor, Shepard, Kinner, & Rosenthal (2002) found in their random sample of 1,000 Colorado teachers that standards were found to improve the quality of writing instruction, reading instruction, probability, geometry, and problem solving explanations in mathematics. The ASK4 is designed in alignment with the CCCS in New Jersey. Abrams (2004) also found that in some states that have high-stakes tests that require students to formulate and provide a written response to the questions, there is an increased emphasis on writing and higher-level thinking. This may account for the improved instruction identified in this study as well.

There were several undesirable effects from the ASK4 testing on instructional methods that fourth grade teachers identified in this study. Teachers felt that during the months from September through March there is less student-centered, inquiry-based learning. Many teachers termed this as doing “fun” projects with their students. This appeared to resume after the March test date. Instead they feel that their instruction is more didactic during this time period trying to get the students prepared for the test and attempting to cover a full years’ curriculum by March. Then from January through March they feel an increase in pressure to cover math topics. Since the test is given in March, there are math topics that haven’t been taught yet because they aren’t covered until April, May, or June. During this time period teachers reported an increase of time in test preparation in all areas but specifically in math and in timed writing to picture and poetry prompts. This results in the regular curriculum not being covered and reducing the amount of instructional time in health,

science, and social studies. Another undesirable effect was that there were too many workbooks purchased for ASK4 practice. One teacher had described it as overwhelming. The teachers' solution to this problem was to self-select workbooks they felt were worthwhile to use in the classroom. Finally, the data received from the ASK4 was felt to be minimal and they would like more information back than the placement of a student into a category. If the test data included subcategory scores that could help them analyze their instructional strategies this could aid in enhancing their instructional practice.

Pedulla et. al. (2003) surveyed 12,000 teachers in high-stakes and low-stakes testing states. High-stakes testing states are those that have testing aligned to their Core Curriculum Content Standards under NCLB and must meet adequate yearly progress quotas under federal law, like New Jersey and the ASK4 testing. What they found was that teachers in high-stakes testing states spent more time engaging in test preparation and began test preparations earlier in the year. This is conclusive with what this research uncovered. Teachers start test preparation in September and it becomes more intense from January through March.

Taylor et. al. (2002) also found in their random sample of 1,000 Colorado teachers, that teachers' attention to a high-stakes test shifted instruction away from social studies and science. They found an increase in the time spent on test format practice. Berliner & Nichols (2007) also documented the narrowing of curriculum to just what is tested and found an increase in time spent on test preparation. A majority of teachers indicated in Abrams' (2004) research that they had reallocated instructional schedules to allow more time to be spent on tested content while

decreasing time on material that was not on the high-stakes test. Teachers also reported decreased time spent on enrichment activities in order to prepare for the state test. Additionally, research by Jennings & Retner (2006) reported that seventy-one percent of schools are spending more time on reading and math, sometimes at the expense of subjects not tested. The subject most affected was social studies. Finally, in (Pedulla's et. al., 2003) research, teachers reported that they spent more time in tested areas and less on instruction in non-core subject areas. It was also reported that testing influenced the amount of time teachers used various instructional methods similar to those that are on the test. Teachers' attention to high-stakes tests can reduce instruction to just test preparation at the expense of other subject areas as seen in this researcher's study as well.

Casabarro (2005) suggests that when the primary assessment of our schools is reduced to tests, there is pressure to turn classes into test-prep centers. But the pressure to the increased demands of high-stakes tests often causes teachers to focus on test preparation (Neill, 2003).

Research Question 3

Research question 3 asked, how do fourth grade teachers perceive the NJ ASK4 as having any effect on their assessment practices? The fourth grade teachers in this study felt that the ASK4 has not affected their assessment methods (see Figure 3). This researcher would argue that the assessment practices have been influenced by the ASK4 but teachers have not identified it as so.

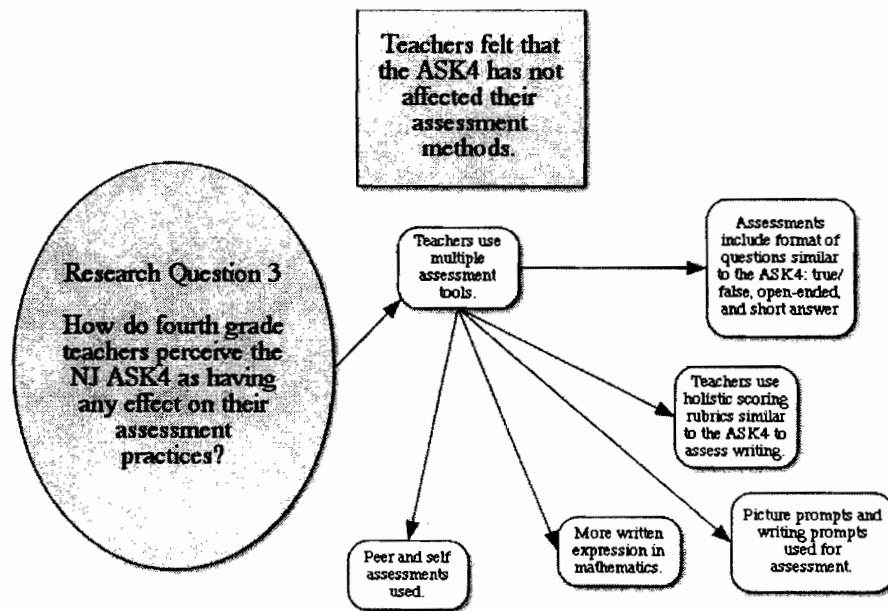


Figure 3. Analysis of Research Question 3

Fourth grade teachers in this study identified using multiple assessment tools with students. Assessment tools used in the three districts included evaluating written expression in math, multiple choice, true/false, open-ended, and short answer questions modeled after the ASK4, holistic scoring using rubrics similar to ones used for the ASK4 to assess writing and picture prompts, and peer/self assessments. The teachers in all three districts felt that assessment choices that they made were not based on the ASK4 testing. They did concur that they used their assessments to give students practice for the test, but it wasn't the only way they assess their students.

Pedulla et. al. (2003) identified that teachers in high-stakes test states reflected the format of the state test when designing their own assessments. Abrams (2004) also found in his survey of Florida teachers that a majority of teachers changed their assessment practices by modeling their own classroom tests after the format of the test. What this researcher discovered concurs with previous research on the effects

of high-stakes tests on assessment; teachers model their assessments after the high-stakes test.

Assessments are the tools teachers' use for evaluations. Fourth grade teachers from this study are aligning their assessments with the ASK4, a high-stakes test, as other researchers have established in previous studies. These teachers recognize that assessment should not include just items reflected in a high-stakes test so they use multiple measures. Assessment is what is used to inform teachers so evaluation of instruction can occur.

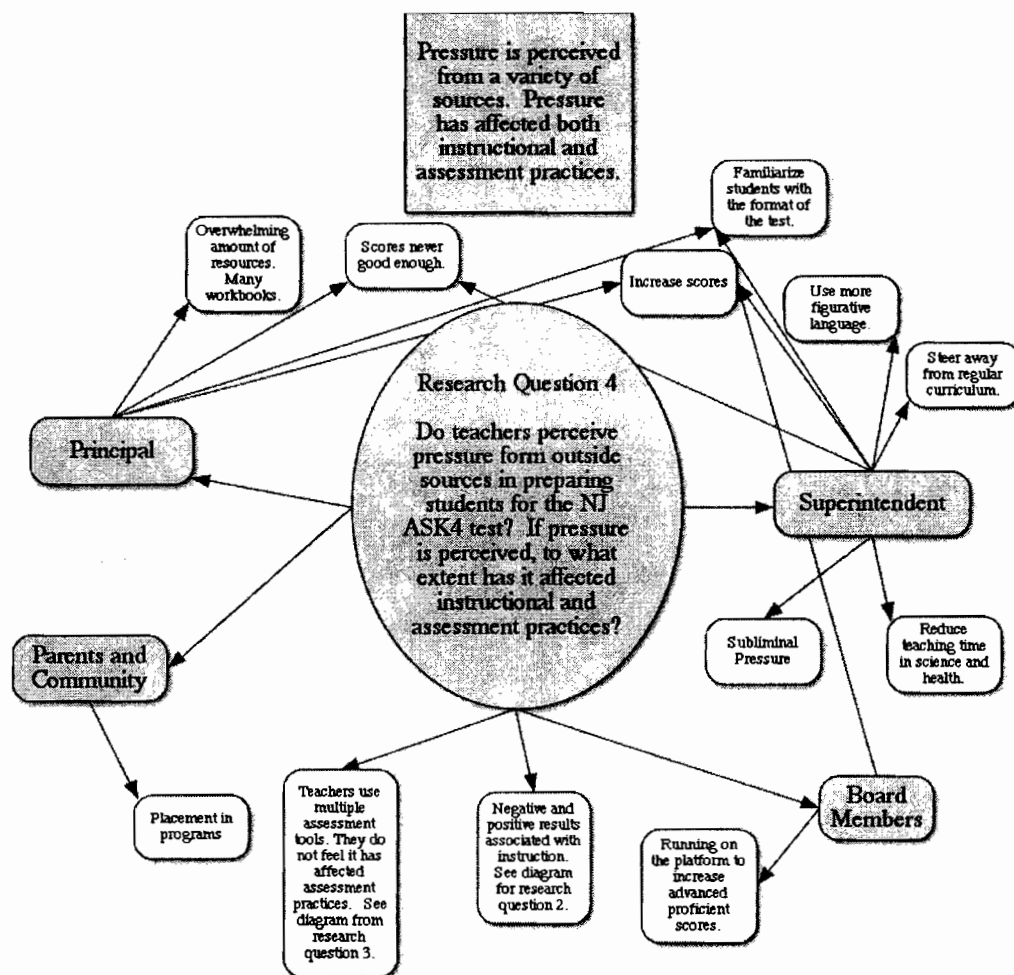
Research Question 4

Research question 4 asked, do fourth grade teachers perceive pressure from outside sources in preparing students for the NJ ASK4 test? If pressure is perceived, how has it affected instructional and assessment practices?

Teachers in this study perceived pressure from a variety of sources (see Figure 4). Parent and community groups were felt to exert pressure in some districts. In these districts parents exerted pressure on board members, administration, and teachers because they want their children to get advanced proficient scores so they are placed in advanced courses. Board members have also run on the platform to progress all students into the advanced proficient range. Teachers realizing that this is not statistically probable, express concern over the public's disillusioned view of achieving this goal.

Administration has also exerted pressure. In one district the principal brought in graphs and data to a faculty meeting. Even though fourth grade teachers reported having excellent scores, the principal still seeks continued growth and improvement.

The superintendent in another district has spoken to the staff during faculty meetings to suggest ways to improve scores. Suggestions included steering away from the regular curriculum to increase test preparation, reducing instructional time in science and health, and to complete practice workbooks.



In a study by Abrams (2004) ninety percent of teachers' surveyed nationally reported pressure from their district superintendent and seventy-nine percent felt pressure from their building principal. Many teachers felt that the pressure from state testing has led them to teach in ways that contradict best practices.

The expectations to get good scores were felt by all subjects in this study. Stress is perceived because the scores never seem adequate enough. Two districts

mentioned instances when they had a high percentage of special education students one year, which resulted in lowered scores. Administrators were not pleased with the results and interventions were suggested. Posner (2004) found that the quality of education and the competence of teachers are being measured by scores on tests like the ASK4 possibly leading administrators in this study to never being satisfied with current scores and always trying to achieve more.

Pressure from the ASK4 test has resulted in desirable and undesirable practices in instruction. When high-stakes consequences are attached to test results, unintended consequences may outweigh the intended benefits (Abrams, 2004). Desirable practices identified by teachers included more written expression in mathematics and more exposure to vocabulary choices. Teachers were proud of their integration of test preparation into core subject areas and not using separate time to accomplish this task. They felt that the 90-minute period for language arts/literacy and the 60-minute period for math instruction were adequate. And finally, using the data to identify students for basic skills placement, math placement, and gifted programs was useful.

Undesirable practices in instruction occur between the months of January through March. During this time period there is an increase in pressure to cover math topics that have not yet been covered. Districts have tried to solve this dilemma in several ways. In one district weekly math packets were developed by teachers to use starting in January in order to expose students to all the mathematical concepts covered in the ASK4. For some concepts it is a review and for other concepts it is the first time it is formally introduced. After the test, those topics are covered in more

depth. In other districts increased time in mathematics from January through March is utilized to expose students to these topics. As a result of the increased test preparation the regular curriculum is not covered, test preparation using practice workbooks is increased, and instructional time in health, science, and social studies is reduced.

During the school year the teachers in this study reported more didactic teacher-centered instruction and less student-centered inquiry-based learning. All of the negative consequences that teachers identified in the study dissipate after the March test date. In September the teachers' view the data but the information is perceived to be received too late, lacks critical analysis of subtopics, and does not contribute to enhancing teaching practices.

Teachers did not identify pressure from outside sources in influencing their assessment practices. Teachers identified using multiple assessment tools although some did mimic the ASK4. Assessments included peer and self-assessments, formatted questions similar to the ASK4, written expression in mathematics, picture prompts, poem prompts, and holistic scoring rubrics similar to the ASK4. While teachers didn't identify pressure as influencing their assessment, this researcher would argue that some of the assessments they use are directly assimilated to the test and are used to familiarize students to the format.

(Hamilton et. al., 2007) launched a project funded by the RAND Corporation to understand how educators in California, Georgia, and Pennsylvania are responding to the accountability requirements. The purpose was to identify factors that enhanced standards based accountability systems, encourage positive change in teaching

practice and improve student achievement. They found that NCLB is affecting the work of superintendents, principals and teachers both in positive and negative ways.

Teachers noted the lack of consistency between state standards and curriculum materials. A majority of teachers felt that the accountability system reduced morale and negatively affected teaching. Teachers reported narrowing the curriculum to focus on tested topics. They also used certain types of test questions and topics in their teaching. Some teachers reported on concentrating more on students near the proficiency cut off. Teachers felt there was insufficient time for instruction and planning. However, teachers did see beneficial outcomes such as a more rigorous curricula and increased focus on student achievement.

Most educators felt that they would benefit to improve their skills by using data for decision-making, to identify effective instructional practices, and to teach low-performing students. Teachers are dissatisfied with using proficient or not proficient as a way to distinguish adequate yearly progress instead of using progress indicators over time.

The researchers (Hamilton et. al., 2007) recommended improving alignment with the standards, test, and amend the curriculum. Educators should be provided with professional development assistance to meet the needs of English language learners and students with special needs. Policy makers should explore ways to better measure school and student performance by basing accountability on student progress at all levels of performance.

(Stetcher et. al., 2000) surveyed principals, and fourth and seventh grade teachers in one state. Positive results indicated that teachers and principals were

familiar with and understood the reform movement. Math teachers indicated more change than writing teachers, and elementary teachers reported more change than middle school teachers. Schools with higher assessment scores reported alignment between the curriculum and standards. A negative consequence was that teachers believed test preparation was a contributing factor to achievement gains. Schedules were modified and instructional time was shifted so that more emphasis was placed on tested subjects.

Research has continually shown that high-stakes testing leads to undesirable consequences. More time is spent engaging in test preparation at the expense of other subjects, test preparation begins early in the year, materials are used that resemble the test, and assessments reflect the format of the state's high-stakes test (Pedulla, et. al., 2003 & Abrams, 2004).

When school success is based on test results, teachers are pressured to turn their classes in to test-prep centers (Casabarro, 2005). This results in the unintended consequences portrayed in this study. While there are desirable consequences to high-stakes testing, the public, educators, and policymakers must be attune to the undesirable outcomes and changes should be made to best enable a higher probability of more desirable ones.

The philosophy is (Casabarro, 2005) the higher the scores, the smarter the students, the better the school. While some may view this as true, how are schools and educators achieving those high scores and are those schools truly better for their efforts?

Research Question 5

Research question five asked, how are fourth grade teachers and school districts using the information gained by the NJ ASK4?

Teachers in this study were unaware of when the data was received in their districts but eventually gained access to it. Some teachers reported seeing the data for the first time in the newspaper. Other teachers reported having to ask their principal for the results in September. Others had the data given to them during a staff meeting in the new school year.

To organize the data, some of the districts compiled the information into graphs and tables for analysis. The ASK4 results were placed on these graphs and tables along with other data received from informal and formal testing in order to gain a more comprehensive view of the students' academic growth. This information was compiled by one of several individuals including the reading specialist, math specialist, or the teachers themselves.

All three districts in this study used the data from the ASK4 to identify students for basic skills placement, math placement, and gifted programs (see Figure 5). In two districts the data was also used to identify students who were close to the proficient range so these students may be "pushed" to the advanced proficient level. The third district indicated the desire to push those students to the next level, but weren't actually instructed by administration to do so. There were no instructional guidelines given to teachers by administrators on how to achieve this goal.

The teachers in all three districts indicated that the ASK4 is perceived as just one indicator of academic growth yet the teachers perceive a lot of pressure from

many sources to increase the scores on this test. Pressure is generated from several sources but was dependent on individual districts. Community members, superintendents, board members, and principals have all exerted pressure. Some of this pressure is subliminal and some intentional. In the face of the pressure from stakeholders, teachers' instructional and assessment practices have been altered leading to desirable and undesirable consequences.

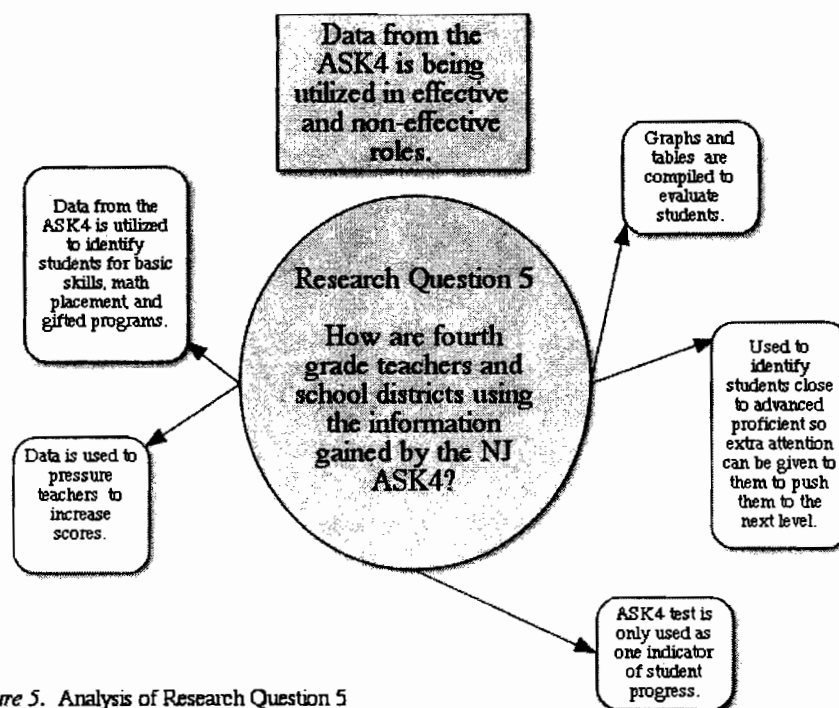


Figure 5. Analysis of Research Question 5

According to Sindelar (2006) data from these high-stakes tests as well as other national assessments should be used to increase students' achievement. Meaningful and useful student test data needs to be gathered. Data should help in aligning local

identifying areas for improvement, selecting interventions or new approaches, and to collect data to see progress.

Research by McMillan (2005 & 2006) suggest that teachers receipt of high-stakes test scores in the summer or fall led to changes in their instruction and assessment practices. Data should include both the previous year and current year's students' data. Positive changes included more emphasis on depth of learning, higher-level cognition, more formative instruction, and an increase in teacher collaboration.

While teachers in this study felt that the assessment was fair, the pressure from the test was felt by all and not well received. Pedulla (2003) found in his study that although elementary teachers viewed the use of the test scores for accountability as appropriate, they felt the media reporting was not accurate, was unfair to teachers, and inaccurately portrayed the quality of education and the complexity of teaching. They felt that the fluctuating scores from year to year reflect changes in the characteristics of students rather than school effectiveness.

Yeh (2001) conducted a study which suggests that it may be possible to reduce the pressure and negative effects of testing by implementing rapid diagnostic student assessments. These curriculum-embedded assessments provide frequent feedback about student progress, which can help to improve teaching effectiveness. Yeh found in his study that rapid assessments made teachers more effective by automatically flagging students who needed help promoting immediate instructional adjustments. It also motivated and engaged students, including special education

students by giving them the feeling that they were successful and in control of their learning.

Using the data in a productive manner that assists teachers in evaluating their instructional strengths and weaknesses is essential to student growth and teacher effectiveness. If teachers are given the opportunity and time to analyze the data and use curriculum-embedded assessments to evaluate teaching effectiveness, instructional adjustments may be made to increase student achievement.

Conclusion

This study qualitatively analyzed fourth grade teacher perceptions of the impact of the New Jersey ASK4 on their instructional and assessment practices. The study included three DFG I level districts. This study did not include other DFG level districts in order to isolate the variable of wealth for analysis. Past research consistently shows correlations between wealth and student achievement.

While much of the research on high-stakes testing focuses on lower economic districts, the issues and concerns displayed by the fourth grade teachers in these high income districts often paralleled those found in other research studies. It is worthy to note that although teachers in this study expressed negative feelings towards the test, they thought it was a fair assessment. The negative feelings were generated from the stress and pressure associated with the test.

Figure 6 delineates a figurative analysis of the perception of the impact the ASK4 testing has had on fourth grade teachers in this study. The ASK4 test, a high-stakes test, places pressure on certain stakeholders. This pressure arises from the accountability factor associated with the test, published score reports, and the

negative consequences associated with not achieving AYP standards.

Superintendents, board members, principals, teachers, parents and community members are all subjected to pressure in various forms. Pressure is then generated to increase scores and is placed on the classroom teacher. Classroom teachers under stress and pressure from stakeholders and themselves adjust their instructional and assessment practices in order to improve scores. Desirable practices in instruction include more written expression in the content areas, integration of test preparation, and the exposure of increased vocabulary to students. Undesirable practices seem more prevalent from January through March and include an increase in didactic teacher-centered instruction, increased usage of practice workbooks, reduced teaching time in health, science, and social studies, increased test preparation, and increased stress on the teacher. After March these negative consequences dissipate and there is more student-centered inquiry-based learning.

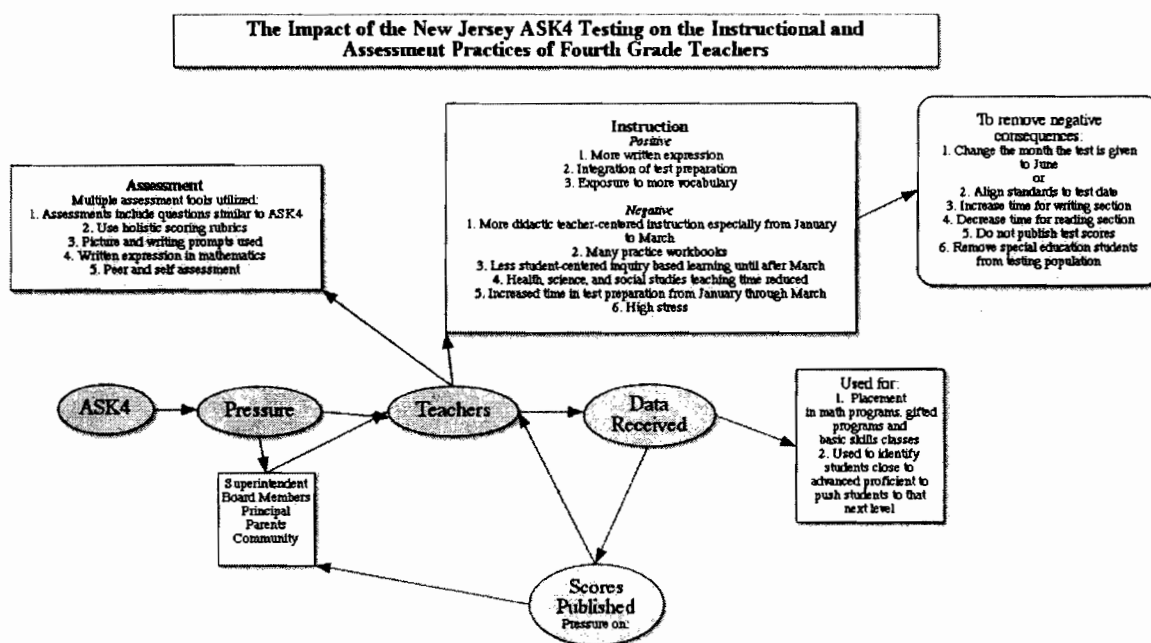


Figure 6 An Analysis of the Impact of the ASK4 Testing on the Instructional and Assessment Practices of Fourth Grade Teachers

Teachers in this study did not feel that the ASK4 test influenced their assessment techniques, although many of their assessment techniques modeled the ASK4 test. For instance there are assessments formatted similar to questions on the ASK4, picture and writing prompts are utilized, as well as holistic scoring rubrics. While some assessments do model the ASK4, these teachers also identified using multiple assessment tools in order to get a more comprehensive assessment of the whole child.

Data is received in these three districts at the end of June but it is not shared with the teachers. In September teachers usually view the data. It is either given to them, they have to formally ask for it, or it is shown to them during a faculty meeting. The data is used to place students in basic skills classes, math classes, and gifted programs. Additionally some principals and superintendents have teachers identify students close to the advanced proficient range and teachers are instructed to “push” those students to the next level. Administration has not offered guidelines on how to accomplish this task but teachers understood it as giving these students extra attention. Once the data is received in the districts the pressure is placed back on the stakeholders and the process is repeated.

Recommendations for Policy, Practice and Future Research

Recommendations for Policy

Policy issues should include guidelines to make the ASK4 or any other high-stakes test less intrusive into best practices in the classroom. While the ASK4 testing is viewed in a positive light there have been unintended consequences in terms of assessment and instruction. Policymakers should consider changing the month the

test is given towards the end of the school year when teachers have adequate time in order to cover all the content in the CCCS for fourth grade. If that is not possible consideration should be made to realign the CCCS to reflect a March-to-March curriculum coverage. The public and policymakers are under the guidelines that the school year begins in September and ends in June and thus students should be assessed for content covered in this time period. In reality the fourth grade test is given in March and policymakers have disregarded the fact that there is still three and a half months left for instruction. Policymakers need to be more open-minded and rethink the possibility that assessment does not have to follow a September through June assessment schedule if the purpose of this assessment is to hold teachers and schools accountable for learning and to improve the educational setting.

The data received by teachers includes a numerical score that places students in one of three categories: not proficient, proficient, and advanced proficient. In order for teachers to improve their instructional practices additional feedback is required that offers a line item analysis in skills for the mathematics and literacy sections. This will allow teachers to analyze their strengths and weaknesses in teaching the CCCS. Without this critical component, teachers are at a loss as to where instruction may have faltered. A line item analysis of skills would provide teachers, principals, and superintendents a critical piece in data collection and suggestions for improvement could be addressed through faculty meetings and workshops.

Policymakers could consider increasing the time for the writing section so it reflects process writing, which is currently taught in classrooms today. The reading section time was deemed too long by teachers in this study and could be reduced.

Having special education students included in the population was deemed to be inappropriate by many teachers in this study. Policymakers could consider exempting these students from the test or at least allowing them to take the appropriate test for their instructional level. Test scores should not be published for public scrutiny as the public may not understand the complexities of the student population, which includes special education students, in shaping these scores.

Recommendations for Practice

Teachers in this study have experienced the impact of high-stakes testing in the classroom. There are several measures, when put into practice that could help alleviate the stress associated with high-stakes tests. First, principals and superintendents should not be putting pressure on teachers to increase scores. Rather they should be analyzing the data, looking for strengths and weaknesses, assisting teachers to grow professionally and instill best practices in the classroom. This may be fostered through collaboration with other teachers, professional development, attending workshops, and researching and implementing best practices in instructional and assessment techniques. The decreased time in teaching science, health, and social studies from January through March should not be acceptable. A change in policy with the test date could certainly alleviate this issue. Otherwise administration should look into block scheduling in subjects to ensure curriculum coverage. Coverage of test material should not be at the expense of core curriculum subject areas.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings and conclusion of this research, additional areas for study are recommended:

1. Three focus group discussions with fourth grade teachers from districts with a DFG of I were interviewed for this study. It is recommended that focus group discussions be conducted with fourth grade teachers in districts from other DFG groupings to analyze the impact of the ASK4 at varying income levels.
2. This research focused on fourth grade teachers. Additional research should be expanded to include other grade levels now taking the ASK to determine if there is a variance of similar themes and patterns across grade levels.
3. Perceptions of administrators and the impact of the ASK4 on teachers' instructional and assessment practices would contribute to the knowledge base on the effects of high-stakes testing.
4. Perceptions of community members, parents, board members, and students of the impact of the ASK4 on instructional and assessment practices would also contribute to the knowledge base on high-stakes testing.
5. Quantitative research through a survey instrument accompanied by a qualitative research design would provide a more comprehensive analysis of the topic.

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this study was to determine whether fourth grade teachers perceived any impact of the New Jersey ASK4 testing on their instructional and assessment practices. This study aimed at gathering information through focus group interviews to get an in-depth view of their perceptions. It is clear from this research that the ASK4 has impacted instructional and assessment practices in both desirable and undesirable ways. This research concurs with the current research base on the positive and negative effects of high-stakes tests. Policymakers, the public, and educators need to be more receptive to the ideas and suggestions of what research is presenting. In the end everything we do in our school system comes down to one thing, what is in the best interest of the child. If our actions lead to negative repercussions to the student's learning then modifications need to be made to rectify that. It is our moral obligation to do so.

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APPENDIX A

Question Route

Thank you for attending. Today you will be taking part in a focus group interview that is being conducted for partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctorate of Education. This interview is being used to elicit teacher's attitudes and opinions of New Jersey's ASK4 testing program. Many of the questions are geared toward capturing the beliefs of teachers about the influence of the ASK4 on classroom instructional and assessment practices. This interview will take approximately one hour to complete. All responses will be kept confidential and will only be reported in aggregate form. Your name and your school district's name will not be used in the report or in the findings. After analysis of the data, a summary of the important findings will be sent to all participants.

You have received a consent form to sign, which indicates your consent to this interview and for it to be recorded. For our purposes today, the interview will be tape recorded. Do you have any questions before we continue?

Please sign the consent form and pass it forward.

In front of you is an index card, folded in half, with a letter in the front. On the back, would you please write your first and last name?

I am going to ask you a series of questions. Please respond freely to the questions in an informal manner.

You have another index card on the table in front of you. I would like you to write down in one word how the ASK4 testing makes you feel.

Q01 What feeling did you record on your card? The feeling you chose was _____. Tell me why you chose that feeling to describe the testing.

My next questions are aimed at getting your opinion of the effectiveness of the ASK4 in assessing fourth grade students.

Q02 Overall, how do you perceive the ASK4 as an effective assessment tool for fourth grade students?

Q03 If you had the power to do so, what would you add or delete from the test to make it a more effective assessment tool?

A primary purpose of state testing programs, like the ASK4, is to motivate administrators, teachers, and students to meet established curricular standards and increase achievement.

Q04 There is great pressure put on administrators to increase scores. How do administrators in your school district specifically address student performance on this test? Please acknowledge individuals by title only.

Probe: Principal, Director of Curriculum, Superintendent

Probe: Professional Development, Test Preparation Materials, Faculty Meetings

This section addresses your specific classroom preparation and administration for the ASK4.

Q05 What materials do you possess that help students prepare for the ASK4?

Who purchased them?

Q06 How do you prepare the students for the test? Be very specific.

Probe: Design of tests, practice materials used, instructional techniques

Q07 Approximately how many classroom hours are spent preparing students for the ASK4?

The assumption in establishing standards and test-based accountability is that they motivate teachers and schools to improve student learning and focus on specific types of learning. Some observers have raised concerns that this translates to teaching to the test while others feel that it leads to effective teaching styles. The ASK4 has been administered for several years now. Think back and examine the way you taught when you first started teaching and the way you teach now.

Q08 Describe how you teach today and how it is similar or different than how you've taught in the past.

Probe: OK, you've mentioned several differences. Let me ask your opinion about each of the things you mentioned.

Q09 Overall, how many hours per week do you spend teaching each subject area?

Q10 Has that amount of time always been the same or has that changed over time?

Q11 To what extent has the ASK4 influenced your instruction?

In New Jersey the ASK4 is used as an assessment tool for the Core Curriculum Content Standards (CCCS). Some people have wondered if the ASK4 has had any impact on classroom assessment practices. This section addresses how you assess the students in your own classroom.

Q12 Suppose I was a student teacher assigned to your classroom. What types of assessment tools would I see being used in your classroom?

Probe: Multiple choice tests, rubrics, essays, other

Q13 Look back to when you started teaching. How have your assessment techniques changed?

Q14 To what extent has the ASK4 influenced your assessment?

The ASK4 was designed in alignment with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) to measure students' achievement in the Core Curriculum Content Standards (CCCS). This section addresses how the results from the test are used in your school district.

Q15 How and when are the results of the ASK4 given to you?

Q16 How is the data from the ASK4 used in your district?

Probe: Placement, evaluation of staff, evaluation of curriculum, other

For this next section I'm just going to ask you a few demographic questions and then we are finished.

Q17 How many years have you been teaching?

Q18 How many years have you been teaching fourth grade?

Q19 What is your age range by a show of hands? If you would prefer not to answer, do not raise your hand. 22-30? 31-40? 41-50? Over 50?

Q20 Is there anything that you would care to add that would provide me with additional insight into your views of the ASK4 testing?

As you leave I will give you a stamped self-addressed envelope to send me any personal message or statement that you may want to add.

Thank you for your participation today.

APPENDIX B
Transcripts of Interviews

District 1**Monday, March 26, 2007****3:15 – 4:15****Actual Recording Time: 51 minutes and 6 seconds**

Investigator: Thank you for attending. Today you will be taking part of a focus group interview that is being completed for partial completion of the degree of Doctorate of Education. This interview is being used to elicit teacher's attitudes and opinions of the New Jersey's ASK4 testing program. Many of the questions are geared towards capturing the beliefs of teachers about the influence of the ASK4 on classroom instructional and assessment and practices. This interview will take approximately one hour to complete. All responses will be kept confidential and will only be reported in aggregate form. Your name and your school district's name will not be used in the report or in the findings. After analysis of the data, a summary of the important findings will be sent to all participants.

Investigator: Okay in front of you is an index card. I'm going to ask you a series of questions. Please respond freely to the questions in an informal manner. So I'm not going to call on anybody. If you want to say something I'll just say D or A. OK?

Investigator: **Q01: You have an index card on the table in front of you. I would like you to write down in one word, how the ASK4 for testing makes you feel.**

Pause.

Investigator: How does the ASK4 for testing makes you feel?

Investigator: OK. A, what feeling did you record?

A: Stressed.

Investigator: Okay, tell me why you chose that feeling?

A: I feel like there's so many components to be put into omm... a limited amount of time as far as the instructional materials that needs to be covered omm... and explaining to the children the formatting of the test omm... explaining to parents, you know, how we are going to teach the materials. There is so much that goes into this limited amount of time.

Investigator: Okay, B?

B: I put annoyed, because I think it's a waste of time and I think there's so many other important things that we could be teaching our kids and instead of wasting all of our instructional time on teaching to the test.

Investigator: C?

C: I put overwhelmed because omm... you have to teach a lot of our curriculum that we normally would teach at the end of the year. We have to push it forward and we have to teach it omm...rather quickly and so it's overwhelming for me and it's overwhelming for the kids.

Investigator: OK. D?

D: I also chose overwhelmed for basically the same reasons. You have to teach so much in a limited amount of time. There are so many other important things that I would rather be teaching to them at that time. And they get stressed and I get stressed and parents get stressed and there's so much in a month and a half that it's just overwhelming...planning it.

Investigator: E?

E: I chose rushed for a lot of the same reasons that we already heard. Omm... specifically that you want to omm... expose the students to so many different topics

omm... although we do go back to it and cover it more in detail later, you're still you know, students feel very omm... stressed and rushed when they don't get something the first time you explain it when your going so quickly. That often happens. So to me it's just rushed.

Investigator: Okay, so it sounds to me like no one is very happy about the ASK4 testing (Laughter). It's very stressful, a lot of pressure on students.

Investigator: **Okay, my next questions are aimed at getting your opinion of the effectiveness of the ASK4 in assessing fourth grade students.**

Q02: Overall, how do you perceive the ASK 4 as an effective assessment tool for fourth grade students? Anyone? As an effective assessment tool?

D: That's a good question.

E: I actually, I actually think that the content is pretty fair and I think that if you're getting an overall view of what a student knows that the questions tend to be, for the most part, fair with a few extraneous questions. I just think that in...I think the testing conditions add a lot to it. So I think that a lot of students' scores are skewed based on those conditions and the time of the year that it is given omm... but in terms of an effective measurement of student's knowledge... I think it's... I wouldn't go as far as saying it's the best thing that they can come up with, but I do think that the

questions are fair omm... and I know that it becomes, you know...I've been teaching fourth grade for 10 years so I've seen... I know that every year more is expected of the students. So I wish that wasn't the case because there's just more and more being tacked on. But I do think that the questions are fair. It does test their understanding more so than I think maybe some of the other tests used to omm... I just think at the time of the year that it's given and omm... the importance stressed on it by the staff, parents, and teaching staff skews the results for the kids a little bit, so I think you really have to watch that. If it was given in a very informal setting, you know, here's your questions, I think some of the questions are very fair.

Investigator: Okay.

A: And I agree omm... with that...with letter E. As far as the fair content of it, although there are extremes omm...as far as the ability level, but I think the time of year... if it were given more time it wouldn't be such a push and then the felt rush for the families and the kids, and throughout the building omm... to get everything done for the testing. And I think then you might get a better sense of ability levels because the children who tend to get nervous or anxious in those formal testing situations might not view it as formal if things weren't compacted into a short period of time. If they had the entire year then it would be similar to other assessments that are given as far as how do you perform throughout the year. So even though it's still a testing situation and not every child is going to perform well on tests, you might get better performance if it's not compacted into a shorter time period.

Investigator: Okay, anyone else?

C: I think that it's a pretty effective measure for omm...regular education students. But my biggest concern about the test is the effectiveness for the students with special needs. Omm... I don't think it's the best way to assess those children. And I have a little girl in my class and I don't know how she would even be able to answer half the questions on the test. I think that it's a waste of her time. And I think it's unnecessary for her to have to go through something like that. It's not a way to test her progress.

Everyone agrees.

B: I have a boy who omm...did not write at all on and NJ ASK. Nothing. And he has special needs and it was a total waste of his time. He didn't write anything for short answers, for reading, for language arts, for science, math, nothing. He could only do the multiple choice. So that's not an effective measure of his knowledge because he can't do the writing. Even though he knows it, he can't express what he knows. So, you know, for that population of kids, I totally agree. It's really stressful for them too and they get really upset. And they don't know what to do. And they can't do it. So I don't think that it's fair for them. It doesn't really show what they know.

Investigator: **Q03: If you had the power to do so, what would you add or delete from the test to make it a more effective assessment tool?** So you think, you said some things...you wouldn't have it omm....so late in the year. You probably wouldn't have it so early in the year. Sorry. You wouldn't have special education students taking the same test. Anything else you would change if you could? If you had the power?

E: I really think it's too make topics.

C: I really don't think science needs to be on it. I think if you're really assessing a student's math and reading and language arts ability, that's fine. But in fourth grade, I really don't find it necessary that you have to see, know what they know in science.

A: Especially when they haven't learned all the topics yet.

All: Exactly.

A: You know and that's why it needs to be later in the year because half the kids haven't even got to half the topics that they are being tested on which isn't fair for them. I think.

E: I was speaking more specific, let's say in the area of math omm... you know because the science test is kind of separate but with the area of math I even think that,

in the math area, there are too many topics, too specific. In the area of geometry, OK, let's pick one kind of topic and maybe that's what we are testing. Because the test doesn't go into detail into the student's thought process as opposed to, you know, picking multiple choice answers so you can see a student's progress with less topics omm... I don't know how that's even possible but I just think it's too... like it goes back to the first question you asked... feeling rushed and trying to cover so much. But if we didn't have to...I mean there is so much we have to cover up to March. If that was covered on the New Jersey ASK, you could still see a student's thought process and the way they're thinking and the way they're learning.

A: ...even some of the other topics that we know are touched on in fourth grade but definitely pursued further in fifth through eighth. You know, we know geometry goes into more detail. Fractions we cover a certain spectrum of it and then the broader spectrum of it is covered later on, so... but on the test the kids are questioned about every nook and cranny of what is to be covered. It's not just September to March.

D: Exactly.

D: If there was some kind of statewide curriculum that said up to this point, right before the testing, every child in fourth grade in New Jersey should know this... Because what we're teaching here is different from what somebody else is teaching. So their kids have the ups on some things and the not so high on the other things.

And if that's what they want, they should tell us by this point, this is what your child, your children, should have learned.

A: The other thing is... I think about five years ago we attended a workshop where they said on the topic of fractions, even though you teach ten subtopics, here are the three that will appear in the test. And we were guided in that direction. So we now were cramming, you know, not cramming, but pushing everything into this specified amount of time up until March. We knew what we had to cover those subtopics and then moving to the rest the year... we would cover the others, which would then be covered again in grades 5 through 8. Omm...and then that changed. Now again this year we were told OK, now these topics will also be on it. So there's a lot of change as far as topics. And the other thing I found was that they didn't always flow in sequential order. So if you're covering fractions on a test and there are ten subtopics that you need some kind of sequential order for the kids to understand it, and then you are going to include 3 or 4 on a test... Don't make it lessons one, five, and eight omm... it seems to be kind of... I noticed that this year more things were added and as far as... make sure you covered this, this, and this but not necessary sequentially. So you had to cover all the lessons and it was still, even though they tried to amend it and make it like three or four top for fractions, it wound up being three or four or all eight lessons. So I found that interesting.

Investigator: Okay.

E: It's always a debate. Do fourth graders need to know how to add fractions of unlike denominators?

D: Yeah

E: But yet we find the need just to expose it before the test, just in case that's on there. When really we could be using that time more wisely. When ideally in fourth grade they should, OK, know how to like, know how to add like denominators. And there's so much you can assess with just that topic. You know I just wish...

A: And some of those topics are part of fifth grade content curriculum. If they weren't, then you would say, OK, those are priorities and teach and assess to that.

Investigator: So I'm guessing from what I'm hearing...overall effectiveness, well what you are saying before, the content was fair. It is just too much, too soon...

D: It's too much for them. The children know that there's so much pressure on them and if they didn't know how big of a test it was for them, I think it would be a lot better also. Their parents put stress on them, the school puts stress on them, we put stress on them. So they know how big this test is. And if they didn't have that idea I think they maybe they would be a little more laid-back about it and then maybe it would be a more accurate assessment. But I know for my class and my students, they get really stressed and there like, "Oh my God the test!" as I'm passing out the

booklets and they're shaking... they're not going to be able to seriously sit down and concentrate if they're that nervous about something.

Investigator: **Okay, a primary purpose of state testing programs like the ASK 4 is to motivate administrators, teachers, and students to meet established curricular standards and increase achievement.**

Q04: There is great pressure put on administrators to increase scores. How do administrators in your school district specifically address student performance on this test? Please acknowledge individuals by title only.

Investigator: So how do administrators...do you feel any kind pressure from administrators?

A: I think our administrators have been rather good about it.

C: I really don't feel any pressure. This is my first year in this district and I really didn't feel any pressure that much from the administration.

A: I think there is an awareness... I think the pressure comes more from the parents and the community, specifically with the scores, because a lot of the parents are wondering where their math placement will be moving into the middle school. And that is part of, you know, what goes into assessing which class the child will be

placed in. I feel like in that respect, specifically with math, the parents put more of the pressure but there is omm... there is score reports that are sent down and comparisons of all six classes. Let's say for this year, as far as how they are related to one another and compared to one another. So it is assessed and the information is there, but I don't feel like it's put in our faces.

Investigator: How about professional development? Do they give you professional development in the district to increase your scores?

B: I feel, I feel that we are very fortunate in this district because I have worked in a district where there was tremendous pressure from administrators on the test. And looking here we are, I mean, I think our administration is very confident in our abilities to prepare our students for the test and I think that's a great atmosphere to be in. I attend some of the omm...superintendent meetings where you know omm... the person who's in charge of curriculum and instruction goes over numbers and number crunches and whenever there is a red light or red flag raised, I can honestly say, it's okay, why is this happening? It's never...blame is never placed on the teacher, or it's never said it's the teaching that's occurring but more so, okay with happening here? Because I think that the administration really does believe in their teaching staff. That we're doing the best we can to prepare the kids as best we can. So I feel in that sense we're very fortunate.

Investigator: Do they purchase a lot of test preparation materials?

D: The pressure is not high but the expectation is there. I think we're let known in subtle ways...we had workshops on differentiated instruction and at the start of the workshops this year scores were gone on over in great detail as far as the assessment of where the kids did, what specific content areas, you know, grade levels or classes that needed to be worked on without pointing out the individual. But the workshops were given. We were given time, which we felt very fortunate, for professional development days to work together in our planning for the curriculum. How we were going to align the test dates this year. So we are given flexibility and team planning time to work with one another so we can set up for that. So, I think the expectation is there. And if we are being given that time, we are being given the resources, but the pressure isn't intense.

Investigator: So it's not like they're physically saying you're going to score higher but there are things purchased or there might be workshops or meetings...

Many: Yeah... more of subtle.

C: Yeah more of a subtle kind pressure... I never felt pressure.

E: But I really think that they are omm... they're not saying here's the materials you are using... they have left it up to us to say if you feel that there's something you found, you found something that would be beneficial, let us know. It's yours. It's

kind of like whatever you need, we'll give you. In terms of a professional development, we've never been asked to attend a professional development for that specific skill. It is up to us. If we came to them and said, look we found this great workshop, we think it'll be beneficial... which I did a few years ago... and it wasn't a question. I was allowed out to go with the expectation that I would share with the rest of the team what was learned and so on. But it's never been, we think you need this.

A: A support system more than anything. And I think it works both ways. The confidence in one another.

B: Right.

Investigator: This next section addresses your specific classroom preparation and administration of the ASK4.

Q05: What materials do you possess that help students prepare for the ASK4?

Who purchased them?

Investigator: Do you all have the same things your classroom? Do you order together?

D: We have literacy books and math books and we have packets that they had made years ago for the different topics. One is a division packet, a geometry packet, probability packet, fractions packet and you map it out on a week to week basis...fractions, probability, division, and map it out that way. So we have packets. And then just outside materials and picture prompts and magazines...

A: We were given professional development time too, to come up with center activities and then the packets to review the activities. So we were given the time to kind of organize. So we share the same materials. We also share graphic organizers. To help the children, we attended workshops to go with that. I think it's a combination of things that we got from outside places, things we've put together through professional development time, and then things that were purchased for us.

C: We also collaborate well together. So one of us finds pictures in a magazine, we'll make sure that the others are aware and then they can borrow our magazine pictures or we go into each other's boxes. Things like that. She also, our administrator also purchased calculators for us because we needed them for a section in the test. So we got brand-new calculators a few years ago.

Investigator: Q06: And how do you prepare the students to test? Be very specific. So what do you individually do?

A: Academic or just the idea of taking it?

Investigator: Both.

A: As far as taking the test there was this great Time for Kids a few years ago that had like destressors for kids... like breathing techniques and like rotating their wrists if they started to feel anxious omm...and stuff like that to help them get through just the idea that it's here and if you feel stressed out, what can you do in this situation because you can't be disruptive and it's a very formal setting. So I always go over that with the kids, you know, if you feel yourself getting tense what does tense mean? How can you calm yourself? So, I think as far as taking the test, I do that.

E: Yeah, I think also to me one of the biggest omm...stress relievers for the students is just making sure they're familiar with the format. So as much as you hate to bombard them with practice tests, for me it was very important for them to see what each section of the test would look like. And we did find this particular book that really broke it down. And with a great, you know, practice workbook... and we only had one for each so it wasn't like we overwhelmed them with many different omm... you know books. But what I found worked best was when I taught a skill, I would then use those books to show the students what it would look like in the testing format so that when they sat down to take the test they weren't overwhelmed. You also want them...well I thought it was important to get them used to timed situations because the tests are timed. And especially in the writing there's very limited time and that would be you know a complaint. But I will say as you...I mean we all do

the same things... when I say we, we really do... but omm... we do steer away from our regular curriculum and omm...I love to say that's not teaching towards the test but in way it is. Everything that I do when I cover each of the topics, D mentioned, you know that one per week... I don't say OK we're going to teach fractions and I'm going to do it exactly like the NJ ASK. I do the same lessons that I would do when I got to fractions...

A: Absolutely.

E: ...in May or whenever I would normally get to them. It's just a little bit more condensed and a little bit rushed. I don't want to say that my teaching practice or my teaching beliefs have been taken over by the test. It's just the way I'm doing it, you know.

Investigator: Now when do you start doing those packets?

D: Six weeks before the test.

Investigator: So for six weeks, every week you're covering different topics.

C: Right after break.

Investigator: So you're saying, you might be teaching fractions after that week but you might not get to fractions for maybe two months.

B: Right.

C: We did an overview eight weeks ago.

Investigator: OK, but for those six weeks the regular curriculum kind of goes out the door while you're

A: I really think it's 10 weeks...January... I mean depending on when the break falls it's January and then it's the third week of March so...

C: And the kids really start feeling it. I would mention the word ASK...AHH...and it's terrible because you don't want to see them not enjoying school but the last two weeks before the test....

A: I feel like the language arts and math kind of work differently because I feel like the graphic organizers we start in September and we kind of work through the different writing formats. The push more from January to March is getting them acquainted with the timing and the type of questioning omm...but I think with the math it's a little different. In September we start covering topics and we do math moments. They're either in the morning or if there's free time during the day. The

kids are exposed to different math concepts that we're not exactly teaching at that time omm...as a morning work activity, as a challenge activity. We kind of incorporate more topics into that time. But once January comes there's more of a push to get those topics in, so I think we're always doing it but I think it's more intensive in the math during that ten week period.

Investigator: Just in math from January to March? Or what about the...

A: I think the timing wise with the language arts. That's when you feel the timing pressure of it. But I always find that my kids don't seem as stressed with the language arts because they've been using the graphic organizers. We have been since September. They're so familiar with the format, it's just acquainting themselves with the timing of it. Understanding different question words, that you're incorporating that into every subject area. I almost feel that it is an easier transition with the language arts because even if we are doing social studies we can incorporate questioning techniques and strategies there with different concepts. But with the math it's pure math moving forward.

(F was late attending a parent meeting and is now entering the room. D is leaving to go to graduate school.)

Investigator: **Q07: Approximately how many classroom hours would you say you spend preparing students for the ASK4?**

B: A day you are talking about?

Investigator: No, during that really intense time would you say pretty much all day?

A, E, D: No.

E: I would say our reading language arts and math blocks.

Investigator: Which is...

B: 120 minutes, Right? Yeah, 120 minutes per day. That's what it is.

C: Although, we do deviate. Like we'll do poetry in there too and we'll do...

E: Like with the reading. The reading there's a little bit of leeway.

Investigator: But that's just for the six weeks...the 120 per day...and then before that it's....

E: You mean before the New Jersey ASK?

A: I have to say I don't think we teach to the test, I feel like, I mean as much as we say that period from January to March is intensive to the test, we've never...we have so much time to plan out together. We're given time over the summer to work together. We planned it out in a way that we incorporated strategies and techniques into other content areas. So the kids whether it's a science packet, you know, when they're switching for science... or a social studies skill... I feel like they're learning the questioning techniques that are specific to the reading language arts portion in those other content areas. So there's not such a push. We still do creative things like literature circles omm... and different more expressive omm...strategies I guess you call them...that's what I'm looking for and we're not just teaching to a test because we know it's coming. And I feel the same thing in math. I mean we're doing hands-on creative lessons, but then the kids have to see the flipside that there are certain questions or certain written expectations that go along with those fun hands-on activities. I think we kind of...

B: There's a lot of centers and manipulatives...and problem solving packets that we created. But really what opened my eyes when I was in grad school... I talked to some teachers in other districts and their whole curriculum for the entire year is based on a New Jersey ASK books. And I was floored because most of our curriculum has to do with trade books and literature circles and then about six weeks before the tests we throw those other things in, in terms of test practice. Some districts, they do this all year long, which I could not believe.

Investigator: Yeah.

B: So, I feel that we're very fortunate in this district that... that pressure is not put on us to teach all year just the NJ ASK.

F: I also think the test...who knows what the test is going to be? How can you teach to a test that you don't know what is going to be. They keep it so secretive. So I think now that your saying the strategies, keeping the kids on their toes so that they can... that they can be able to, you now be omm... be flexible when the test comes up that they have different abilities for different topics. So it's hard to teach to a test when you don't know what it's going to be.

A: And I think through differentiated instruction we've learned so many different ways to question that I think that it's almost intrinsic and what we're expected to do every day... so instead of, we don't have to teach the kids that explain means to describe, means this as far as like what a question could mean to them. We're not always saying describe this when they read it. So we're using different vocabulary to expose the kids and I think it's just something we've picked up on through what we've learned in our exposure to test to. So I think that helps.

Investigator: **The assumption in establishing standards and test-based accountability is that they motivate teachers and schools to improve student learning and focus on specific types of learning. Some observers have raised**

concerns that this translates to teaching to the test while others feel that it leads to effective teaching styles. The ASK4 has been administered for several years now. Think back and examine the way you taught when you first started teaching and the way you teach now. So this is probably more applicable to people that have been teaching fourth grade for a while.

Investigator: **Q08: Describe how you teach today and how it is similar or different than how you've taught in the past.** (To A) So like you were saying before, even though you do all that preparation you still think that that's ... your teaching content. If you look back before the ASK4 testing, would you say you were teaching like that before or do you think it's changed?

A: I think two areas that I've noticed a change in myself just from being exposed to the test, I don't think my goals for the students or the way I structure my lessons has changed because of the test, but I think the vocabulary choices that I make. You know I'm exposing to the kids across the content areas to more vocabulary that might appear. I think that's something that I've definitely done more of. And also expecting them to include written expression in math. You know, what is expected of them not just to be able to demonstrate and show and we always tell them to explain it like their sharing it with their first grade-reading buddy. If you were teaching your first grade reading buddy what we learned in class today and you had to just, and not just 10 problems to write about, but just one problem... whether it was finding the perimeter or something... well what does that mean? Maybe you can perform that,

and maybe you can take a rectangle and find a perimeter but in written expression can you explain that? If you were going to teach your first grade reading buddy. So I think that's another area with the math that we expect them to write and be able to back up their answer. And I'll do a thing like called assistant professors, where I have the kids come up after I introduced a topic and somebody that feels comfortable can come up and demonstrate the next one or two.

Investigator: OK. Anyone else?

E: I agree with that. Omm... I think... I don't really think my teaching style has changed so much. I think that a lot of the activities remain... I feel a lot of my assessment has grown omm... over the years because if I'm creating an assessment I might include a few more questions that might be similar to those that are asked on the New Jersey ASK.

Investigator: But do you think the assessment is more effective or a better assessment now?

E: I do, well, I had mentioned that earlier that I actually do think that the way that they're assessing students' thinking process is effective, because of the written expression. Because there's no longer you know, like A said, finding the actual perimeter, but more so what is the perimeter? So I think that even from a teaching standpoint, yeah it definitely allows me to see if my students really understand what

that means or can they just... or do they know they just have to add these sides you know...along those lines. So...

C: Since we only, like really push the NJ ASK curriculum through for eight weeks or whatever, we're lucky that it doesn't get ...it gets a little boring at the end but not the whole time. We keep it pretty lively and creative. That if we had to do that all year, it would get very boring, very quick. So I think we're fortunate that is not longer than it is. That we do that stuff.

F: I would say that I definitely, over the past couple years that I've been teaching, I learned a lot from students and what works for them. So that next year either I bring up and say, hey that kid taught me this last year now I'm going to teach you... so I do get ideas from the students as far as what works for them or what language to use or what kinds of things to focus so omm...that kind of changes every year as far as what the kids bring to the table.

Investigator: So would you say that you're... in terms of how you've changed in terms of assessment was more with like more written response. I mean like you're not doing multiple choices type of assessments...you're doing more authentic types of assessments.

A: I think it is a combination so they are exposed to all different types but I don't think omm... Yeah, I think just giving them a combination, I don't think there is one

that we stick with or one we do more of. I just think we are more aware of needing to be able to write, especially in the math content areas to explain themselves. For me there's more of an awareness. I think everyone kind of agrees with that.

C: I think to that there are so many different learning styles too. You can't teach to the test with all the different learning styles and all of the resources that we've been given to differentiate.

E. I think that's a good point. I think that in the area in terms of, have I changed my teaching style to meet the needs of the test? No...mostly in the area of math with the written work. I truly do not believe that my teaching style in language arts has changed due to the test.

Investigator: **Q09: Overall how many hours per week do you spend teaching each subject area?** So do you have a block of time? You were mentioning before... So how much time is blocked out for math everyday?

A, B, C, and D: 40 minutes?

Investigator: Language Arts?

E: 40.

Investigator: Is that language arts/literacy?

C: Yes. It's 80. 40 and 40 back to back.

Investigator: So reading is included in that language arts block?

C: Yeah it's 80 total. Forty and forty combined back to back for 80.

Investigator: Okay, now how about science?

B: 40.

Investigator: A day?

F: Four days a week.

Investigator: Social Studies?

C: 40 every day.

Investigator: Am I missing anything?

E: We have spelling.

C: Spelling which we also use part of it to catch up with social studies or science or you know other things we like to do. And if there is an assembly we'll swap.

Anything going on in school we'll swap in place of the spelling.

Investigator: Now have any of you taught here prior to the ASK 4 being administered in this school?

E: It was called something else, the ESPA.

Investigator: **Q10** Did the administrators do the same kind of schedule back then or has that changed?

F: I was here for one year when we had it differently, because we were departmentalized. So there was a lot more switching going on. So for that year I was just language arts. So I taught six periods of language arts a day to two different classes or something like that. I don't remember exactly. But they switched, so it was a big time constraint from switching. So when they came in you only had 30 minutes to begin with omm... but other than that I think the difference is that we're in the same classroom all day. So, omm... that was really the only difference.

Investigator: **Q11: Okay to what extent has ASK 4 influenced your instruction?**

So basically, you were saying, a lot of you were saying, that have been here, that you

don't think it really has influenced your instruction at all? Is that an accurate assessment?

Everyone: (Nods) Yes.

Investigator: In New Jersey the ASK4 is used as an assessment tool for the core curriculum content standards. Some people have wondered if the ASK4 has had any impact on classroom assessment practices. This section addresses how you would assess the students in your own classroom.

Q12: Suppose I was a student teacher assigned to your classroom. What types of assessment tools would I see being used in your classroom? So you mentioned some before. You said you were doing more with the math and the writing. You said you were doing more with the writing aspect, multiple choice, what else would I see?

A: True and false assessment, open-ended, short answers. We try to...because we are also preparing them for the middle school grades and the idea that they're going to be switching classes and getting different instructors. We try to vary the assessments so the kids are familiar, not just from a testing standpoint but also because the type of instructor that they'll get. You know from fifth grade on might be very different in their approach and how they assess. So we try to get the kids prepared for different levels.

E: I agree it's more of a variety. We try to give them...

A: It's not because of the test that we have chosen to do anything specific.

F: We do a lot of performances and stuff like that.

C: It's not all paper.

F: Posters, all kinds of things. I want to go back to the instruction thing for a second. I think the test has changed our instruction, just thinking about it. My first couple of years I would just go straight through the curriculum. Now we have to actually stop and teach things we would teach in May or June. You know, two weeks in February and March. So in that case it has.

All: It has.

F: It definitely interrupts the flow and then what happens is, from the period after the test is given to when school ends, it becomes what kids think of as a review because they've already been exposed to it. They haven't mastered these things yet, but there like... oh we've done this before, we've done this before. So you do have to... you have to kind of recycle it and make it fresh. Things that you did a month ago, for a

week now, your doing for a whole unit which you know is a couple weeks and you have to make it fresh. So I think that definitely affects instruction.

A: The way the instruction is? You mean the time?

F: Right. Yeah, I remember the first year we were all together, we really didn't have a plan to you know, get that information and to expose the kids before the test. And we had to sit down and actually plan out, well, have a schedule, get out a calendar; we have to do this by this date.

C: We teach the same topics that are on the curriculum map, we just teach them in a different order

F, A: Right.

C: Because of the timing of the test. If the test was later in the year it wouldn't even affect us. We would still be teaching the same topics, it's just the time frame that is given.

F: Right. If you are going to come in before the test and watch how we teach geometry for that week and a half or so that we're doing it to, you know expose them to it and if you come in after the test in May or April when were doing geometry it's

like two different you know, two different curriculums. It's just different because of the speed that we have to teach it at.

A: And there's opportunity for grouping more later on when you're going through that revision stage. You have kids that one-day that you taught that specific topic, got it, didn't need to be retaught it again. I mean the higher end of your class. So when you go back to it there are those students that need the re-teaching, that need to go back to it, or at least expose them again. And there are kids that don't need it. So you have the opportunity.... you know, it's up to us to want to differentiate and challenge some of the kids, review with some of the kids. So you see a little bit more of that in the last like month or so of school because some of the kids really caught on right away and were exposed and they don't need that whole lesson again. You're going to lose them if you do.

Investigator: OK.

Investigator: Have you omm.... How do you feel your assessment techniques have changed? Do you feel since you started teaching, for those of you who have been teaching a long time? **Q13: Have your assessment techniques changed at all?** Do you do some things more or less?

F: I feel like my assessment changes on a daily basis. (Laughter)

C: I think we use a variety of assessments and always really have... to appeal to every different learner in your classroom.

F: Yeah, every kid is different, every class is different, every year I'm different so...

(Laughter) I try to do what works for me and what makes sense at the time so.

Investigator: Do you put it more in line.... like if you said...I don't know since they go over your scores sometimes during workshops or things... would you change your assessment based on that? Like maybe they weren't scoring as high in writing so maybe you are doing more writing assessments and timing them?

E: I don't think that the assessment changes. I think if anything my teaching would change. You know, how can they better perform? How do I get them to reach a better score? Or...yeah the approach to it, but the assessment has not changed.

Because I think like I said...we offer a variety of assessments. It's not like, Oh we've only been doing this... let's try.... I really don't think we needed that but maybe our avenue to get the students' success would be different.

Investigator: But would you say for those who were teaching the ESPA's, when you were doing the ESPA's were you doing so much writing assessment back then? Were you doing so much math assessments back then with the writing?

F: Yeah, I... definitely like person A said before... definitely there's more writing in math now and that's definitely changed. But we were still doing picture prompts during the ESPA, and we were still doing story elements, and poetry prompts, and all that stuff has been pretty consistent. But omm... for the more that I read of what kids have to write about, math and writing in reading, my expectations are always evolving and getting different. So in that case I don't know if that has to do with the test but just my experience about being around kids that changes I guess.

Investigator: **Q14: So to what extent has the ASK4 influenced your assessment?**

So what I gather is...it really hasn't?

(Laughter)

F: And we're not in a school system where... that you know it's going to impact us. Because we're such professional teachers and w're so good. (Laughter) When it comes down to it, it's joking, but we prepare our students. You know that's the bottom line. And we also have the parents give a good backbone to these kids. They get them prepared as well. It's something that, you know, every year they come up to whereas if you are in a different school system where you might not have that outside support then yeah, of course, the test is going to change the way you work your day to day classroom activities and your assessment and things like that so...

A: I think too, the fact that we have such support and that we are provided with ...I think understanding. We are provided with so much opportunities to understand different learners and differentiate so that lends itself to what we do with the New Jersey ASK. I worked in a district before where I didn't have the support that I have here. It was a very different income and everything else as far as the district I was in and unfortunately you kind of see the effect of what's available to you. You know the more workshops are available to help you differ your question techniques and your strategies in the classroom the stronger you're going to be with the kids I think.

F: I also have a friend who teaches in another school system, which is not comparable to our, like economic status or however you want to put it, and she is under a lot of pressure. And because she's under pressure the kids are put under pressure and the parents put pressure the kids. I think one thing that we've all been able to do here is to relieve some of that pressure and let the kids go in there and take the test and do what they're going to do. If they do great, they do great. If not, you figure out, you know, how to help them. I think attitude has a lot to do with it as well.

C: I think our kids come into our grade having a really good foundation so we're just adding onto that foundation and giving them a little bit more of the strategies that they need to perform well on the test.

Investigator: Do you feel pressure to push them up to that advanced proficient level?

C: They mentioned it a lot this year. They want to get more kids up into that level but I didn't feel pressure to do it.

A: I feel like we would love to see them succeed in that way too. There's a tiny amount of personal pressure you put on yourself because I really want the children to succeed and feel-good ...but not where it's been kind of drilled into our heads by administration and curriculum advisors that it needs to be done, you know, but of course we would all love to see it.

Investigator: **The ASK4 was designed in alignment with the no Child Left Behind Act to measure student's achievement in the Core Curriculum Content Standards. This section addresses how the results from the test are used in your school district. Q15: How and when are the results of the ASK4 given to you?**

F: We get them right at the end of the year and then they get mailed over the summer to the parents so we get a chance to see them at the end of June.

Investigator: And you see just your individual classes or the entire fourth grade?

F: I think we see the entire fourth grade, but personally I only look at my kids' grades. And frankly I look at them for five minutes and I say great that's how they did and I put them somewhere else and it's not that huge of a deal.

E: Kids are gone by then you know.

C: Our head of curriculum actually will give us like, spreadsheets.

Investigator: And you will get that when? At the end of this year or the beginning of next year?

F: End.

E: For next year we will get the incoming classes. For example, we'll get this time's third grades scores. Yes. Broken down.

C: This way we have an idea of where our classes are already.

A: But I think this past October we got a further breakdown of the New Jersey ASK like more than we would have in the past. More of a breakdown comparatively of our... each class.

E: Our incoming class, not our class now.

A: The incoming class.

E: Incoming.

A: But we got a comparative look on how they did.

Investigator: But you also get your own scores. Do they break it down so you can see where you are weak? Or where your strengths are?

A, E, C: I don't know.

E: We got pretty much the same score reports. We got...I'm pretty sure we get the same score reports, the one the parents get. It's not broken down into very specific skills, but however they break them down on the parents score reports. So it might be like process and application. Like the four categories. We also give in our district a pre-and post-standardized test. So we use that more than we use New Jersey ASK scores.

Investigator: You have your own district test?

All: Yes.

E: Pre and post twice a year.

A: And we get those spreadsheets along with NJ ASK spreadsheets. So we kind of get them mixed up. We look at all the data together.

E: The pre and post that we give are so specific. It will break it down to addition and subtraction. It's not as...so that really guides our teaching more than New Jersey ASK scores.

A: We do see our kids' scores from the previous year. So like this year we will see our kids' scores but when we come in September we'll get the New Jersey ASK scores for the kids from the incoming third-grade class. Then they'll take the other two assessments in math and reading and language. We'll get those scores and then like in October we got all of it together in more detail and it was all gone through. And a couple sessions...a faculty meeting...a start of our workshops.

C: But the grade will break down, like for reading comprehension, like where they're falling down like main idea, inferencing, which... to help a teacher. OK, now this year I'm going to work with my students on inferencing because that's where most of the class was falling down last year. So I don't think NJASK breaks it down that specifically. We get a number.

Investigator: **Q16: How is the data from the ASK for used in your district? Do they use it for evaluation of the staff, placement of kids?**

All: Math placement.

Investigator: That's it?

A: Not so much with the reading language arts. I mean, I think they look at it for the middle school, math placement.

C: It's also how the kids can be flagged for basic skills. They have to perform below a certain level in order be considered for the program. Oh...and an enrichment too.

Investigator: Do they use it to evaluate the curriculum at all?

All: No. Nope. Not that I know of.

Investigator: Staff?

All: No.

Investigator: **For this next section I'm going to ask you a few demographic questions and then we're finished.**

Q17: How many years have you been teaching?

Investigator: F

F: I've been teaching omm... this is my sixth year.

Investigator: A

A: 5

Investigator: B

B: 2

Investigator: C

C: Fifth year.

Investigator: E

E: 10

Investigator: **Q18: And how many years have you been teaching fourth grade?**

Investigator: F

F: Sixth year.

Investigator: A

A: 5

Investigator: B

B: 1st

Investigator: C

C: 5

Investigator: E

E: 10

(Laughter) Ten! Oh my!

**Q19: What is your age range by the show of hands? If you prefer not to answer do not raise your hand. 22 –30? F, A B, and C
31 – 40? E**

Q20: Is there anything that you would care to add that would provide me with additional insight into your views of the ASK4 testing?

F: I mean, do you really want this on tape? (Laughter) Only kidding. The bottom line is it's a test. It's a score. You take it, you know you take it with a grain of salt and you move on. For me I look at it, it's a number on a piece of paper. It tells me nothing about a student. You can only learn from a student so much from a test score especially a standardized test score with numbers on a test that we give... the New Jersey ASK can be skewed so differently with the amount of questions that are being asked, what happened to that kid that morning. So I do take it with a grain of salt. If a kid does great, fantastic. If not, you now I'll look at it where they need to improve. I think I've had enough kids where I can make my own judgment on that. But the bottom line it's a test score and more importantly it's a fourth grade test score. So it's not like this is going to ruin a child's life if he does terrible on it. It's not like it's going to make or break them for the rest of their life if they do terrible on it and I try to relay that to my students. That it's just a test. It's really not that big of a deal and, you know, you move on. So...

A: And there's the mixed feeling about it I feel like in the community. Some parents put so much emphasis on it even though it is only a grade four test. Because they want their kids to do well on everything. And then other families pull their kids out for vacation.

All: (Laughter) Right.

A: And then they're pulled to go with someone they never met before to take the test. Does that skew it? I mean there is so much that goes into it.

F: And then again... Sorry to interrupt. But that's only my opinion. I mean I'm not speaking for anybody else here or for the district. I mean that's my opinion it's a test it's number.

E: I also want to mention that I'm on an intra-district math committee. We do curriculum and it's a K-12 committee and it's probably on my mind because I had my meeting this morning but I find there's so much more emphasis on the like HESPA and the GEPA. I mean they are spending so much time. I personally feel, yes, changing their teaching, changing their habits. But I don't see that happening at our level. I think because our scores, you know, yeah we get them, and we don't feel that there's... If this isn't met and if this isn't met... there's no cause and effect.

C: Also our scores overall, are excellent. Where not a district that has bad scores or is on the state list for, you know, being watched or anything like that.

A: And the idea that you see a kid... I'm sorry...who does so well. Who gets it immediately? Who does a great job? Who performs average? And you know they are not the average kid in your room, and it happens. When you see that year after

year because there's always one or two of those kids where you see the performance and you say, Wow!" because they always did such a great job and performed so well. It makes you kind of look at the test in a different light too and say, what is it really teaching me any about this kid.

F: And the other thing I tell my kids is that there is really only one standardized test that you really need to worry about in your life and that is the SATs. And the reason is because that has become such a widely used, you know, thing for colleges and universities whether you are going to be accepted or not. And that's how they are going to judge you on because that's all they see is a number. So I look it as like, person C said before, we do have so much support and the kids come in because they already had so many tests from first-grade, second-grade, third-grade, fourth grade. They're taking a test, a standardized test, to practice really to take a standardized test in fifth grade and were practicing for six grade, seventh grade all the way up until they have to take the SATs and hopefully they have the basis of how to take a standardized test by time they get there. So that's what I think is important for the ASK, but other than that I don't know.

C: Did you need to know person D's demographics?

Investigator: Do you know it?

C: First year, 22 to 30.

Investigator: And how many years in fourth grade? Just the one?

C: Yep.

Investigator: OK.

Investigator: **As you leave I will give you stamped self-addressed envelope to send any personal message or statement that you may want to add. Thank you for your participation today.**

End of the tape.

District 2

Tuesday, May 15th 2007

3:45 – 4:30

Actual Recording Time: 33 minutes and 50 seconds

Investigator: **Thank you for attending. Today you will be taking part in a focus group interview that is being conducted for partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor of Education. This interview is being used to elicit teacher's attitudes and opinions of New Jersey's ASK4 testing program. Many of the questions are geared toward capturing the beliefs of teachers about the influence of the ASK4**

on classroom instructional and assessment practices. This interview will take approximately one hour to complete. All responses will be kept confidential and will only be reported in aggregate form. Your name and your school district's name will not be used in the report or in the findings. After analysis of the data, a summary of the important findings will be sent to all participants. OK, in front of you is a piece of paper. I'm going to ask you series of questions. Please respond freely to the questions in an informal manner. So I'm not going to call on anyone. If you want to add something, just talk and add your opinions.

Q01: OK, on that piece of paper, I would like you to write in one word how the ASK4 testing makes you feel. How does the ASK4 testing make you feel?

Investigator: I'm just going to go around the room. OK A, What feeling did you record?

A: Stressed.

Investigator: Tell me why you chose that feeling.

A: Omm...the pressure put on by omm...scores of the students and it's your teaching ability looked at and how well you prepared your kids.

Investigator: OK, B.

B: Stressed.

Investigator: OK, why did you choose that feeling?

B: Basically the same reason. Because of your students' performance on the tests and having them fully prepared is reflected of the teacher's ability, I think, in the classroom.

Investigator: C?

C: Stressed. (Laughter) Omm... for the same reason as we're saying. I also think that it's a lot to omm...in some districts they expect you to teach a lot to the test although they may not say that you're teaching to the test. So you have to do that on top of curriculum or integrated with curriculum and it becomes appalling.

Investigator: D?

D: Stressed, for the same reason as omm ...she just said. I'm thinking that omm... your stressed about not only covering the material for the test but as you said, covering the rest of the curriculum and will you find the time to do it, you know, especially with winter break and the end of the year. So everything is just stressful.

Investigator: OK, E?

E: I also put stressed.

Investigator: We're all stressed.

E: Yes, omm...I also think it's the amount of material they expect us to cover from September to March. I think perhaps if the tests were pushed back a little bit, I may not feel as stressed? I don't know.

Investigator: OK, F?

F: I agree. Stressed. For the same reason everyone else did and I think that the scores that are put in the paper omm... that plays a big part of it. If it wasn't put in the paper for the whole town or the whole state to see, it might not be so stressful, but...

Investigator: And... F? I mean G. I'm sorry.

G: I also put stressed. Omm... just basically to follow up on everyone else. It's just...no matter how you look at it's an intrusion on the school year. Whether you say you don't teach to the test or you do, it's just, you stop basically your flow, and I can just judge by the way I feel after the test to know that this is an accurate... you know after the test is over you just feel relieved like you can get back to teaching and being with the kids and that sort of thing. So without a doubt, stressed.

Investigator: **My next questions are aimed at getting your opinion of the effectiveness of the ASK4 in assessing fourth grade students.**

Q02: Overall, how do you perceive the ASK4 as an effective assessment tool for fourth grade students?

Investigator: Anyone? An effective assessment tool. How do you feel?

F: I almost feel like it's higher than what we expect. I know what we were doing omm... math grouping...a lot of these kids were in the advanced proficient...math scores... and they couldn't cut it in the enriched math group so at least in the math sections I feel that way omm... and I almost feel for the language arts literacy it's almost lower than they omm... They score lower than... I think... I don't know how to say it...I feel like their scores are lower than what these kids produce.

Investigator: So you think the math is over inflated and the language arts/literacy is under?

F: That's my opinion.

Investigator: OK.

C: I think that omm... the reason why the language kind of lacks is because how we teach language is we go through process pieces of writing. We take a week; we take two weeks if not more. And on this test, the kids are expected to do everything in 25 minutes and give their best. And I think that's not really a true assessment about how they really write. When they're under a time constraint it really limits them and they don't have time to go back and revise, or edit and look at their work again. It's really a one-shot deal done, gone.

B: It's completely contrary to what we teach on a regular basis.

G: I feel there's two tracks that we are trying to prepare the kids for. Because they have, like you said the timed tests cause their going to go to the GEPA and their going to go to the HESPA and their gonna have this testing life that they have to do well at and there's also the real-life that they had to do well at. So it's kinda we are preparing them basically for these two styles of learning that your under the gun and timed and just that overall approach to making them better learners.

Investigator: Q03: If you had the power to do so, what would you add or delete from the test to make it a more effective assessment tool? What would you add or delete?

A: More time for the writing pieces.

B: Definitely.

F: I would say yeah, more time for the writing pieces too.

C: Omm...I think, I think the testing should be pushed back a little bit. This is supposed to be a true assessment of fourth grade and yet in math we don't nearly cover or teach what is supposed to be on this test, so therefore as the test gets closer we're stressed because we know that there's going to be questions on the test that pertain to things we have not taught yet. Because it's a simple progression of how fourth grade goes so... I think it's not a true assessment in some cases because they don't even learn the stuff yet.

B: You just try to expose them to it...

A: Right.

B: ...a little bit. So you hope that they can get, you know, one or two questions correct if it that happens to pop up on the test. It's really cramming really at the end.

E: I also think some of the reading passages are way too long. I think they can do...I think the kids are under pressure, under stress as well, and they are taking these statewide assessments and the passages are way too long and to have them sit there

while they're under pressure and try and focus for such an extended piece. I think that is a little too much honestly for fourth graders.

F: And they give them so much time for that section. They give them almost an hour...

Everyone: Right.

F: ... and they are done within 20 minutes and they have to sit there for a half-hour. When the writing section, they give you 25 minutes and the kids are cramming. So I think the time constraints need to be fixed.

A: Definitely.

Investigator: OK, so you're saying time, earlier, I mean later in the year it should be given and you really don't think it's a good assessment because you think it over inflates certain scores.

G: I think what makes something a good assessment is the feedback you get from something to improve the kids. That's basically the goal of an assessment. What do we get from the ASK? We get nothing but a number. We don't get a...

Everyone: (Agrees)

G: Right, you know we don't really get a true...you know what we get from the Terra Nova are areas to improve on...we kinda get that diagnostic approach. Where the ASK is, just in my opinion, is just a tool for state monitoring and state report cards and things like that. So as an assessment tool I think it's horrible in that we don't have anything to grow from because of it.

D: And the scores don't come out until the following year.

G: Right, and what can you do with it?

Everyone: Right.

Investigator: A primary purpose of state testing programs like the ASK4 is to motivate administrators, teachers, and students to meet established curricular standards and increase achievement.

Q04: There is great pressure put on administrators to increase scores. How do administrators in your school district specifically address student performance on this test? Please acknowledge individuals by title only. So administrators, how do they pressure you?

A: Our principal brings graphs and data to faculty meetings and we analyze it and look for areas that need to be improved and we have to go back to previous grade levels that aren't even tested for the ASK and see what we may be doing to help bring up the scores in third, fourth and fifth grades.

B: And we did look at the breakdown from Terra Novas to see weak areas. And not to mention the numerous resources that are brought in by administration, which is overwhelming beyond belief.

C: Too many.

G: I feel sometimes our success is an opportunity for... someone to find something wrong with it. You know what I mean. One year we had all hundreds.

F: Yeah.

G: ...and all the advanced proficient weren't as high as they could be. And we were pretty excited with ourselves, doing a good job...and well your advanced proficient weren't so good. So it's always...

F: Right, these can be higher.

G: Right, and going back to the stress thing, it's kinda never good enough.

Regardless if it's all hundreds, you know...

Investigator: They always want more?

G: Right.

Investigator: Anyone else?

Investigator: **This section addresses your specific classroom preparation and administration of the ASK4.**

Q05: What materials do you possess that help students prepare for the ASK4 and who purchased them?

A: The school district purchases the ASK Coach, language arts, and textbooks.

F: We get the language arts and the math ...and the science one...Coach.

C: And there's a couple versions of the science book.

Everyone: Right.

A: And we have editing one's too.

Everyone: Right. Yes.

G: Editing, revising...

A: Right.

F: So they got rid of that because there wasn't... (laughter)

Investigator: That's it? Just the books?

D: I would say we have about seven to 10 different resources.

Everyone: Yeah.

Investigator: Workbooks?

D: Workbooks. Right.

G: Just specifically for the ASK, for the New Jersey ASK. Then there's also the spiral reviews and the test prep materials that come with our curriculum materials that are basically generalized for the country...you know New Jersey's not the only state

that has these, so you get more of a general sort of test prep material that comes with our curriculum. So there's... almost everything we have has some sort of test prep.

Investigator: Did you have any say in anything that was purchased?

B: We did.

F: The New Jersey ASK Coach book we wanted. The language arts/literacy one we really wanted because it has a great skills... teaching skills... but we weren't allowed to give it out until after back-to-school night so the parents didn't think we were teaching to the test.

C: And you weren't really allowed to send it home.

F: Yes.

C: It's an in-schoolbook.

F: Yes.

Investigator: **Q06: How do you prepare the students for the test? Be specific.** So in your own classroom. What do you do?

C: I think omm... starting at the beginning of the year we really focus on open-ended questions, and how to respond to them even on our quizzes. Like in social studies or any content area, we'll have like an essay question, which they have to respond to in a certain format that will help them with the format that they might see on the test.

D: In writing we have omm... we show them samples of scored writing pieces and have them score them as well and just supplemental materials that we use.

F: I do that for math too. Where I give them a question from an old math book and show them samples of what children have done and they score it. Same thing they do with language they do math also. And then practice, practice, practice the 25-minute time limit.

Investigator: How about the design of your tests? Do you design your tests so they reflect...?

A: We do multiple choice.

B: And we use a lot of the practice tests out of the resource materials.

G: I always start with following directions. You know, that's one underlying theme that seems the whole test is on, direction following. And that's something that I

think that no matter what subject it is they have to be able to read and do what's required of them. That's something I start day one, is just that piece of following directions.

Investigator: **Q07: Approximately how many classroom hours are spent preparing students for the ASK4?**

(Laughter)

C: I have no idea.

B: January, February, March. Half of March.

C: I think that's hard.

D: I wouldn't know how to answer that.

F: I wouldn't either because even though we're not supposed to ...

B: We try to integrate as much as we can.

A: From September you're focusing on it.

Investigator: So you were saying there are areas in math that aren't covered. So how do you address that for the test?

C: There are areas in math that we know are not covered, how do we address them for the test? It's called drive-by math.

Investigator: So will you just drop what you're doing in math.

A: Yes, a least one-day a week.

F: I do it a little differently. I have the enriched math group so it's a little different. I give them omm...there's an ASK practice test in the math book and I give them that and then I'll go over a page or two each day before the test...because they're enriched most of them can pick up the things that I have taught. So I still continue with it but...

G: We also use Everyday Math.

F: Well Everyday Math counts too. And I...

F: You can't say this. (Under breath)

G: I can say this...I don't follow the program as I'm supposed to. I do the basic components of it, you know, the little pieces, but I was... we have 15 minutes every morning. It takes me between five and ten to do what I'm supposed to do and I always add a...we're working on long division or quick quizzes in geometry or mainly shapes. Those little things that you can't always...

F: We do little activities that kind of touch on things. Whatever we need.

Investigator: So would you say time wise you can't really put a time on it because it's just kind of integrated in what you do?

G: 300 hours

Investigator: And would you say that you spend more time...

G: One hundred days before the test typically. How many hours would you say we do?

F: I wouldn't have any clue.

B: I would say integrated up until January and then a large focus from January on until testing.

G: Practice, practice... writing pieces...poem prompts, picture prompts...hours.

E: Except in Social Studies.

F: Right.

Investigator: Do you find that omm...that you let other subjects go?

All: Oh yeah. (Nodding) Uh huh.

Investigator: Which subjects would you say you let go?

All: Health, Health and Science, Yeah, Health and Science...

Investigator: I want to go back to that administrator question for a minute. Do your administrators, district-wide or your meetings on Mondays, do they do anything with professional development or workshops or anything with you to help make you do better on the test.

C: I think we have.

A: It's like a graph of all the scores.

Investigator: District or your principal?

C: District-wide. No. This was a couple years back though that they had brought us all together... the reading specialist and they had showed us, and I'm not sure whether it was district-wide or school and they should us how omm... this was the Terra Nova, I'm sorry they showed us how to look at the information and use it with the Terra Nova's.

Investigator: For the ASK they never had a district meeting or faculty meetings...

G: Wasn't P.L. math with an intent to get us to increase our math?

C: Yeah, right.

G: And then we had M.J.D. for Science.

A: Right.

Investigator: You've had some consultants.

All: Yeah...some consultants.

Investigator: **The assumption in establishing standards and test-based accountability is that they motivate teachers and schools to improve student learning and focus on specific types of learning. Some observers have raised concerns that this translates to teaching to the test while others feel that it leads to effective teaching styles. The ASK 4 has been administered for several years now. Think back and examine the way you taught when you first started teaching and the way you teach now.** So this might be more applicable to someone who has been teaching this grade level awhile.

Q08: Describe how you teach today and how it is similar or different than how you've taught in the past. So do you feel ...even if you've only been in the grade level a few years...do you feel your teaching has changed at all because of the ASK testing?

A: It's all I've ever known.

B: All I ever known.

F: Even though I've been in the district in fourth grade the longest, I've always had the ASK.

Investigator: Before that it was the ESPA.

C: That's right the ESPA.

F: That's right.

G: I changed grade levels where I taught third grade and my experience teaching third grade was far different than teaching fourth grade where we now have to answer to this test. It was just ...it was more fun. It was more of, you know, using your language arts block to use a story to you know... a lot of this S.K. stuff that we're learning now are the types of things that I brought when I came out of school with me. Things that I just kinda did. You know? Literature circles and discussion groups and things like that where... in fourth grade in didn't really lend itself to those things when you have to stop and use test prep materials. So I feel like the stress involved and the omm... just the fun of the activities changed a little bit.

Investigator: Do you do more workbook pages then?

G: Well, I had workbook pages in third grade also because Spotlight on Literacy was really workbook driven, but I felt like I got away from the workbooks more in third grade because I felt like I had the freedom to. Where in fourth grade I felt...I feel like I have to complete these things. Where third grade I knew I had to do them, but I had a little bit more freedom in and taking a more creative approach in the things I did.

D: I think that it actually has gotten, has been worse, now.

Investigator: Worse than...what sense?

D: Because I feel like when I first started teaching fourth grade it was a little bit more laid back with testing. I feel like over the course of seven years that it's every year become more pressure, more pressure, and more pressure. More books, more resources, more teaching, start earlier, everyday. So I think as I've moved along here, the pressure was put on. Even more so each year.

Investigator: Anyone else?

Q09 Overall, how many hours per week do you spend teaching each subject? So in math, reading...

All: Math, five hours.

A: Plus fifteen minutes for Everyday Math Counts each day.

F: I mean, yeah your Everyday Math counts.

B: That's another hour and 15 minutes or so.

Investigator: So that's about 6 hours for math. What would you say for reading?

B: 45 minutes, five times a week.

Investigator: 45 minutes, five times a week?

All: Yeah. (Nods)

Investigator: Language Arts?

Multiple Voices: 45 minutes.

Investigator: Same thing? 45 minutes?

All: Uh huh. (Nods)

Investigator: Social Studies

Multiple Voices: 45, 3 times a week.

Investigator: Everyone?

All: Uh huh. (Nods)

Investigator: Science?

G and B: Twice a week.

Investigator: How long, 45 minutes?

C: Health is integrated...

G: Yeah, Health and Science are integrated.

Investigator: So Health/Science would be twice a week?

B: Well Health is technically twice a week. I do Health different.

F: I don't count Health as my Science. I do it at a different time. It's only like I have a half hour right before lunch, so I do that twice a week.

A: Yeah.

Investigator: Any subjects I'm missing?

A: You covered them.

Investigator: OK. **Q10. Has that amount of time always been the same or has that changed over time?** So do you feel like you spend more time teaching math or reading or...?

A: We've increased math.

G: I think math is the only one we increased. Originally it was like a 45-minute block, now it's turned into an hour. But I think that's the only one. Everything else is pretty much the same for me.

C: Right. I think so.

Investigator: **Q11: To what extent has the ASK4 influenced your instruction?** So do you feel like...? (To G) well you were kind of saying that you felt it has influenced your instruction in terms of third grade? Does anyone else feel like it's influenced their instruction at all?

C: In a good way or a bad way?

Investigator: Either way, good or bad?

F: I think like he said (to G), you stop what you're doing, right before the test and you have to you know, drill poetry prompts and picture prompts, and.... I think that it stops the flow of whatever you're really doing.

B: It stifles creativity.

D: It takes away from the quality of what you're teaching. Like you were saying before the drive-by math is stressed... here it is, learn it today, and we'll touch base with it again later on if we have time.

Many: Hopefully, yeah. If we have time. Sometime in June.

D: I think that sums it up. I think it's a poor message to send to our students also.

E: There are some areas in the omm... Coach book that I found... some of the lessons in Language Arts have been...some are useful. If I know I'm going to be teaching something in Language Arts or in Reading. I've looked at the Coach book and tried to pull lessons out of that to enhance what I'm teaching.

Many: I like the Coach book.

F: You have to understand, we didn't have any books for a very long time, so everything was created and come up with on your own. So this Coach book is a godsend. We're not used to having anything.

Investigator: So do you like the materials that they've purchased for you in terms of helping you with instruction?

B: I think each teacher selects what he or she is most comfortable with. I use Coach a lot and some of them I disregarded.

F: You can't get to everything. It's way too much.

F: I don't think I've done Super Writers more than twice.

C: Right. And I think I've done it more this year.

G: I love Super Writers.

F: I just can't get to it.

Investigator: **In New Jersey the ASK4 is used as an assessment tool for the Core Curriculum Content Standards (CCCS). Some people have wondered if the**

ASK4 has had any impact on classroom assessment practices. This section addresses how you assess the students in your own classroom.

Q12: Suppose I was a student teacher assigned to your classroom. What types of assessment tools would I see being used in your classroom? Some of you had mentioned multiple-choice activities...

A and C: Open-ended.

B: Open-ended is huge.

F: I use the holistic scoring on the rubric.

Many: Right, uh-huh.

Investigator: Anything else? True or false?

Q13: Look back to when you started teaching. This might be more applicable to people who have been teaching for while. **How have your assessment techniques changed?** So do you find that you assess differently? (To G) You were saying you were at a different grade level so do you find you assess differently.

G: Definitely. I think, like you said in third grade, I assessed kids more on making story maps and there was a lot of omm...maybe being assessed on group activities, group work, omm... oral presentations, scores, things like that and I don't do as much of that in fourth grade as I did in third. I just, I just don't feel there is... I just don't have the time for it. It just doesn't fit into the...that testing procedure. Toward the end of the year I do those kinds of things, which is why I enjoy once the test is over. You know, it's kind of I like the test earlier because then I have more of the year to have fun afterwards.

Many: That's true.

Investigator: You were saying that since you've been teaching for a while...

C: Right.

Investigator: ...do you find more stress? Do you find that your assessment techniques have...?

C: I actually, I'm finding that I'm starting to try to be more authentic with my assessments. I think it's something that I'm going to work on next year. And I think it's coming in with S.K. like I'm looking at reading in a different way in how to assess the students like...I probably shouldn't have said her name...assess the students

differently it's more based on what they're getting out of the reading, whereas like just multiple choice answers.

Others: Uh huh.

Investigator: Anyone else?

Q14 To what extent has the ASK4 influenced your assessment? So do you think it has influenced your assessment? People who have been teaching awhile? Do you think you assess in terms of that test? To help you get higher scores? Do you model your tests after it to help you get higher scores?

C: Can you repeat that question?

Investigator: **To what extent has the ASK4 influenced your assessment?** So do you think you model your assessments after the ASK4?

F: I think I try to get them, to get them ready to know what they're lacking in or what they need to improve on, or what they're doing really well... I think I focus my assessment on so they know what to do well for the ASK test kind of thing. Omm, I would say if this is on the ASK you would be getting a four point or a three point here because this was missing. Or you got four points here because that was, you know, you used this. I try to give them those types of clues.

Investigator: OK.

C: To make them more aware....

F: Right.

C: ...to make their responses and how they would be scored.

F: Right. Does that make sense?

C: Yeah.

F: OK.

Investigator: The ASK4 was designed in alignment with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act to measure students' achievement in the Core Curriculum Content Standards (CCCS). This section addresses how the results from the test are used in your school district.

Q15 How and when are the results of the ASK4 given to you?

F: Do they come in the summer?

E: I think they come in the summer.

G: Don't we usually get the raw score first? And then the...

C: I feel like we don't even get a chance to use, from our kids who we worked with for that test...we don't see those scores and put them to use.

F: I see them when they're in fifth grade.

G: Yeah. They get posted in the paper. I feel like the first time I really get to see them is when they're in a newspaper.

C: I agree.

G: The newspaper comes out. Whatever, it's November and they're going on, and now we get the grief or the accolades of our scores from the previous year and those kids are now in fifth grade and then all of a sudden well what are we going to do about...maybe we didn't score a hundred this time...what are we going to do? Well those kids are long gone...what are they going to do?

(Laughter)

Investigator: Does your principal, I know you were saying before about the graphs and things, does your principal really....

D: Provides a lot of that information, not really to the teachers...on overheads...at faculty meetings.

Investigator: At the end of the year or the beginning of the following year?

A: Leading up to.

F: November.

D: Starting in like November.

Investigator: The year before scores?

D: Analysis. Yes.

C: We have that too.... our math specialist...reading specialists.

A: Ours did too.

G: I don't think this answers this question but I think you asked a question earlier what we do with the scores.

Investigator: Right.

G: Omm...we've been using them...I forgot about that...

F: I forgot too.

G: When we go to our building meetings now we have to come with a spreadsheet basically of...

C: We do too.

G: Yeah...the student's Terra Nova score...

F: A pie graph.

G: Terra Nova score, ASK score, broken down by Language Arts, Math along with their district holistic score and basically it gives us a break down and a pie chart to show our students, as you know for each classroom, who has a larger group of omm... advanced proficient, proficient, or below proficient. That's what we have to

kind of bring with us each time we go to a building team to discuss our kids. It's on EXCEL.

A: That's what you have to do?

G: Yeah. We went through quite a few faculty meetings last year on how to use it and then this year we were expected to do it.

F: It's about five or six columns you fill in...

A: How much time do you spend on this?

G: In the beginning of the year quite a bit, you know, entering the data and that sort of thing.

F: Once you have the data in front of you it's not hard, but you know.

Investigator: But you're entering this data from the previous year.

G: Well you know, we take the Terra Nova in the beginning of the year so the Terra Nova goes in right away.

F: And the holistic.

G: And the holistic right. And then there's also a cognitive score they get from third grade, Terra Nova, their IQ score, that goes in there as well, kinda so we know what kind of kids we are working with. And then the ASK scores are entered.

F: Third grade.

G: Right.

Investigator: Now are the other schools doing that too?

C: We are not quite there yet. We actually...our math and reading specialist have put together something for us for team meetings for all the teachers. But it's not in the...

D: Well we did purchase a program.

C: Right.

D: To input all these scores so I'm sure we'll have to. We purchased some sort of computer program that does all the umm...

C: Data analysis.

D: Yeah, right.

G: I really...I don't know what we have done with it other than to go oooh you got all E's or oooh... I think the goal is that to say, Ok, your group happens to have a larger percentage of omm... not proficient then you would get more support and that kind of thing would develop. But I don't think we really have taken it and gone anywhere with it, just more for reporting.

B: I'm sorry if you said this, but it also impacts if a child qualifies for ASP.

(F shows spreadsheets and charts to group)

Investigator: Who does the charts for you?

G: We have to do them. The spreadsheet is....the spreadsheet omm... is already created so it's just basically entering and it tabulates everything. We just had to learn how to turn it from one to the other to turn it into pie charts.

Investigator: It sounds like to me, the district or each principal does it a little bit differently in terms of what they do with the data and how they share it with their staff.

All: Mmm... hmm.

Q16 How else is the data from the ASK used in your district? You mentioned that before for basic skills...kids that fall below a certain level. Do they use it to evaluate curriculum? Do they use it to for omm... math placement?

All: Math placement, right.

Investigator: Evaluation of staff? Do you ever get evaluated by your principal?

Many: No. Not that I know of. Not formally or legally. (Laughter)

G: But I'm sure those discussions have taken place.

Investigator: **OK. For this next section I'm just going to ask you a few demographic questions and then we are finished.**

Q17 How many years have you been teaching?

Investigator: A?

A: This is my sixth year.

Investigator: B?

B: I'm finishing my third.

Investigator: C?

C: 7th.

Investigator: D?

D: 8th

Investigator: E?

E: 5.

Investigator: F?

F: 9.

Investigator: G?

G: 7.

Q18: How many years have you been teaching fourth grade?

Investigator: A?

A: 6.

Investigator: B?

B: 3.

Investigator: C?

C: 8.

Investigator: D?

D: 2.

Investigator: E?

E: 5.

Investigator: F?

F: 9.

Investigator: G?

G: 3.

Investigator: **Q19: What is your age range by a show of hands? If you would prefer not to answer, do not raise your hand.**

Investigator: 22-30? A, C and E. 31-40? F and G. I'm guessing no one is 41 –50?

B: I am.

Investigator: No. Are you? No you're too young for that!

Investigator: **Q20: Is there anything that you would care to add that would provide me with additional insight into your views of the ASK4 testing?**

F: I think you asked a lot of good questions.

All: Yeah.

A: You covered it.

Investigator: **OK. As you leave I will give you a stamped self-addressed envelope to send me any personal message or statement that you may want to add. Thank you for your participation today.**

End of interview.

District 3

Monday, May 23, 2007

2:30 – 3:30

Actual Recording Time: 45 minutes and 2 seconds

Investigator: **Thank you for attending. Today you will be taking part in a focus group interview that is being conducted for partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctorate of Education. This interview is being used to elicit teacher's attitudes and opinions of the New Jersey's ASK4 testing program. Many of the questions are geared toward capturing the beliefs of teachers about the influence of the ASK4 on classroom instructional and assessment practices. This interview will take approximately one hour to complete. All responses will be kept confidential and will only be reported in aggregate form. Your name and your school district's name will not be used in the report or in the findings. After analysis of the data, a summary of the important findings will be sent to all participants.**

OK, in front of you is an index card, folded in half with a letter in the front of you. That's how I'm going to refer to you during the interview. I'm going to ask you a series of questions. Please respond freely to the questions in an informal manner. So, I'm not going to ask anything very specifically of you, except in the beginning. You know, just in conversation just respond.

You have another index card on the table in front of you. I would like you to write down in one word how the ASK4 testing makes you feel.

Q01: How does the ASK4 testing make you feel?

Investigator: Okay A what feeling did you record?

A: Aggravated.

Investigator: Why did you choose that feeling?

A: Omm...I think basically I feel aggravated because we've given them feedback in the past and I feel that it's not really taken into consideration when they revamp it every year.

Investigator: OK, B?

B: Annoyed.

Investigator: Why?

B: Ahh...because I think it really hinders what actually goes on in the classroom and what should go on in the classroom because you're basically teaching to the test.

Investigator: OK, C?

C: Ahh...I put stressed because I feel under pressure to get through so much in the curriculum in time for that test especially with the math.

Investigator: OK, D?

D: Overwhelmed kind of overlaps her because if you feel like you have to get through so much as well... (mumbles) It's just too much to have to deal with by March.

Investigator: E?

E: Same, frustrated. There is a lot of content that has to be covered in a short amount of time. And if it was later in the in the year, you have more time to cover it and know it better.

Investigator: **My next questions are aimed at getting your opinion of the effectiveness of the ASK4 in assessing fourth grade students.**

Q02: Overall, how do you perceive the ASK4 as an effective assessment tool for fourth grade students? An effective assessment tool. Anyone?

A: I think it's effective in some ways in that I like there is a writing piece and that omm... there are open-ended questions. Because I think just in ABCD format isn't really telling of children in general. I think you get a better piece of information about them when looking at their umm....a sample of their written work. My... my problem with that is the subjectivity of it all. And that who's looking at it is still an issue and so is the omm... time that they identify with each part of the test. The time that they give to it seems a little out of whack to make.

Investigator: OK. Anyone else?

C: I agree. I think it's effective in some ways. Omm...I think the Language Arts might be...may be more effective than the Math, because we haven't covered all the content by March in Math. Or we try, but you can't. And I think the timing of the writing piece is a problem because I don't think it's reality that you know...children of that age are expected to write so much so perfectly. You know... and have that proofread and everything. That's not the way the writing process works. So I think that's a problem with that. Omm...and even some of the timed pieces of the math, which is maybe not enough time. Things like that.

Investigator: Anyone else?

E: Any piece of assessment can help somehow, but the problem is we get the scores back and they're already in another grade. So it doesn't help us, to help them when they're with us.

Investigator: When would you like the scores?

E: I don't know. I don't know what would make it better. But if we had it sooner...

A: You can't really get the scores sooner because the test (inaudible) is too soon. I think the problem is that the assessments themselves in the writing especially, is not authentic assessment. I think authentic assessment is for children to learn to do what writers do. And so we've been teaching the writing process and as a process... and in 25 minutes they have to plop down a writing sample and they're not allowed to use reference materials, and they are not allowed to use their dictionaries and thesauruses, and you're not allowed to ask someone to proofread it. And I get, I get the not asking anyone else to proofread it, feedback thing. That part I get. But the 25 minutes from soup to nuts is such an injustice to the kids in our school district who have been learning this process for a very long time and by fourth grade are mystified that it no longer matters. I think it just sends the wrong message to the child.

Investigator: Anyone else?

B: Yeah, that's the thing, with the time, it kills them. Because you go from quality to how fast you can get something done and that's the sad part. And yeah, I mean it does ahh...some of it is good in assessing kids. Like with the open-ended questions, which are important. So they can at least explain what they've done and show what they've done. But I think the writing thing is, is just out of control with the amount of time they're given.

Investigator: OK.

Q03: If you had the power to do so, what would you add or delete from the test to make it a more effective assessment tool? So you were saying, different timing. Right?

E: Different timing. Definitely the writing samples. 25 minutes is not enough time to compose a piece, revise, proofread, and make it a better piece. We've always said that. That should be a longer piece. It's something that they never did.

C: 45 minutes to an hour they need to do that.

A: I think the test should be in May. I think if it's to be a true assessment of kindergarten through fourth grade. If it was a K-3 test, then I can understand giving it in March, but it's a K-4 test. And it's supposed to be by the end of fourth

grade...well by the end of fourth grade isn't March 11. There is a lot going on when a child is going from nine to ten. There are huge, you know, growth spurts that I think are happening right now. And I just think it's unfair to the kids.

E: And the interesting thing too....even since the test...I've had some of my weaker writers all of a sudden, now they're starting to use dialogue. And that was not in place a few months ago. So, they're not really seeing the true picture of what they gained. Because like you said, they're growing at different rates, they're maturing, and they turn ten. Those few months make a huge difference at this age.

Investigator: Anyone else like to see anything changed?

A: I would like the scores not to be printed in the paper. (Laughter) I think that's a huge problem. I think when a person gets voted on to the board because they're going to bring everyone in our district to be omm... advanced proficient it's a bit of a mindset where... what do you think was in the water when you had your children that they're all so brilliant? And why is proficient no longer good...

E: Acceptable.

A: ...and there seems to be some kind of equation with omm...the more money a district is deemed to have, the more it is up the alphabet on the scale of districts, the

more brilliant the children should be. And so I would like to see that changed as well.

Investigator: **A primary purpose of state testing programs, like the ASK4 is to motivate administrators, teachers and students to meet established curricular standards and increase achievement.** (Laughter)

A: I'm going to pass this through my nose (soda). I'm sorry.

Q04: There is great pressure put on administrators to increase scores. How do administrators in your school district specifically address student performance on this test? Please acknowledge individuals by title only. So you just mentioned. You have board members that are putting pressure.

A: That's how they got voted in. That was their platform.

Investigator: And now they are trying to get everyone in the proficient range?

A: No advanced proficient.

Investigator: OK.

B: Everyone's gifted.

Investigator: Everyone's gifted?

A and C: Yes. (Laughter)

C: It doesn't make sense though, because in a normal bell curve, which you learn in college, take a statistic course anywhere, you have to have the partial proficient, proficient and advanced proficient. The norm should be proficient in the middle. So you shouldn't, I mean, yes (inaudible) the whole No Child Left Behind with President Bush. It's impossible to expect those partially proficient students to all be advanced...that's whose there...that's part of the population. You're always going to have that. Yes, you'd like to see them improve but you are always going to have some that are partial, most who are proficient, and the top end of the scale will be advanced proficient. So you can move a little farther along but you're always going to have that. So, it doesn't make sense to me in the first place that everyone would be proficient or advanced proficient. That's not reality.

Investigator: Let me ask you... how are these board members... have they just got on the Board recently?

All: Yes.

Investigator: So they haven't done anything in terms of making you do certain things yet? Have they?

A: We always had practice books.

Investigator: OK.

A: And we've always been told. (Imitating an administrator) You know, just integrate the materials. Don't teach to the test. It's not important. We're looking for progress. But one individual student over the course of time, and I guess they got that out of a book because it sounds so really wonderful. But that's not what they're doing. You know, they tell you...don't, don't worry, do the best you can. And then when they don't do well we have a meeting going...What did we do wrong people? What should we do? (Others imitate questions) Or the test is in two weeks. Here's a practice book that you can use. It's 500 pages. We should have been doing this from September. See what you can do.

B: Why don't we throw such things as Science and Social Studies on the back burner? That was another thing.

A: Oh yeah.

D: Science and Social Studies don't matter.

Investigator: So these board members, basically, they're going to purchase more materials and have you...

A: Basically we are talking about our superintendent.

Investigator: OK, so it's the superintendent. Tell me what kind of pressure the superintendent is putting on you to do.

A: It's subliminal.

Investigator: In what ways is it subliminal?

A: (Imitating Superintendent) I know you guys are doing the best you can. Don't worry about anything, but the scores have to be higher. It's not that we care, but we're an I district. Don't worry about anything, but bring the scores up. It's like Jekyll and Hyde, Jekyll and Hyde.

D: Make sure you use similes and onomatopoeia.

C: Oh yeah, throw in some similes in their writing.

A: Someone must have just told him that...onomatopoeia. (Imitating Superintendent) and it's... my children have been using practice books since September. Really, you just gave us ours, and I believe it's January. So you know it's, don't worry about it Houdini, do your magic.

Investigator: And how about your principal? Does he follow suit with the superintendent?

All: No, no. (Laughter)

A: No, no he doesn't. The poor man understands, what we're dealing with and has no answers for us, because he's got his superintendent in the basement of the same building. We're supposed to be candid. (Laughter) So he doesn't run the faculty meetings because the superintendent does. But the year the scores were not well or good, because there was a huge mass of special ed children...

B: And they don't print that in the paper how many special ed kids there are.

A: We had 25% of our population that year. So they all sat us down and said, what do you think happened to the fourth grade test? Nothing. You know? You know that saying that you can't make (inaudible) from a cow's ear? Well...this is the material that we have.

E: We got slammed.

A: Yeah, we got slammed. They sent us for workshops because we obviously didn't know what we were doing.

E: Oh, and also didn't this year or last year with the math scores. I think for the sixth grade, and now we had to do a whole new math series. Wasn't that for the same kids?

B: Yep.

All: Ohh...Yeah.

A: The bad nut. You know.

C: So there's a lot of external pressure. A lot of external pressure. It's a trickle-down effect.

Investigator: It must be harder in that you only have one school too. Where you have your superintendent right here in the building.

A: I think he makes the parents crazy over nothing because they are hearing it at board meetings and as they get into kindergarten... and they don't have an older

child... their first reaction, as I would expect it to be is, "Oh my gosh! On my gosh! What should I be doing? Should I be sending my son for extra courses? Should I be tutoring? I tutor kids specifically to pass the NJASK as if that was going to get them into Princeton someday.

All: Yeah.

E: And I have a boy I am tutoring now omm...who was in the gifted talent program in my class last year...specifically, so he would do better in the writing portion of the test this year.

Investigator: **Okay, this next section addresses your specific classroom preparation and administration for the ASK4.**

Q05: What materials do you possess that help students prepare for the ASK4 and who purchased them? So you mentioned that the superintendent had purchased some practice books that you got in January.

B: Yes and a math series too.

A: Reading, Language Arts...

Investigator: You have workbooks?

A: Yeah.

Investigator: Who purchased them?

A: The school district.

Investigator: OK. In math?

C: Math has a practice component. In the New Jersey ASK section is a practice book.

E: It's part of our series.

Investigator: Did you purchase anything? Did you ever have any say in purchasing anything?

C: We did for the math that we wanted.

A: Since she and I were ESPA they came to us with three samples of books and said, which one do you like the best? And we didn't know because it was a brand-new test. What was that, eight years ago we did ESPA?

E: Yeah.

A: We had to do the omm... listening and writing...the speaking component. And what about Science? We had to buy labs, and soil, and that just fell off to the wayside. So...

Investigator: Do you have a lot of workbooks? Would you say?

All: No.

D: No. One for each.

C: Just Language Arts... (Many speaking at once.)

Investigator: **Q06 How do you prepare the students for the test? Be very specific.** So, personally. Are there things... specific things that the district makes you do in the classroom to prepare for the test? Are there certain things that you just do to prepare for the test?

C: Timed writing.

B: Picture prompts.

D: Picture prompts. Materials where there's interesting pictures, because they always make them respond to pictures on the ASK test. Get those, copy those, share

them. We have the kids have the 25 minutes that they are supposed to. They're supposed to create this miraculous piece of writing.

C: It was suggested that we send them home for homework too. Remember at one of our meetings. As we got closer to the date.

All: Yeah.

Investigator: So you start that September?

All: Yes.

Investigator: And how about for Math? You're saying there are certain things for Math...

A: We do warm-ups. I go through ...they have a spiral review. There's a spiral review for the NJASK. I literally do all my teaching for that book...that little book. Those are the lessons that I do. So it's really not like the scope and sequence of our textbook. It's more like a Chicago math with a little bit of everything, everyday. So that I can honestly feel, that by March I've hit on everything. So at least we may look at a decimal or a fraction and they're not having a coronary.

Investigator: Is there anything you specifically do for Math to make sure you teach other than that spiral review? To teach those areas that you know you haven't covered.

All: Problem solving, problem of the day...

Investigator: OK.

Q07: Approximately how many classroom hours are spent preparing students for the ASK4? So are there certain months that you think are heavier in terms of practice...

All: January, February, March.

C: Right after the holidays. That's when it really kicks in.

Investigator: And how much time would you say you're really concentrating or focusing on specific ASK4 testing?

A: I'm trying to count. Half the day?

Many: Half the day?

Investigator: From January to March.

A: About 30 hours a week.

Investigator: From January to March.

A: Yeah.

E: 30 hours a week?

A: Yeah. That's 3 hours per day.

C: That's what I said half a day. That's three hours a day.

D: So that's too much.

E: That doesn't make sense.

C: That's 15 hours a week.

All: 15 hours. Yeah.

C: I was going to say 30?

A: Maybe that's why my kids don't do well in the math. (Laughter) I'm kidding.
I'm kidding!

C: But once you had the test too, there are a lot of things, you know that are very specific to it. Like if character analysis is in it. So you make sure that you cover a good amount of character analysis, character traits, that sort of thing when you do your novels.

A: But in order to be familiar with the test, then you can really start picking and choosing the way you want to do it. But if you're not familiar with it then it's more difficult.

C: And knowing like when they have the short answer questions for reading. Just teaching across the curriculum that when they write their answers I always make them write everything in complete sentences... use part of the question in their answer, so they are used to it whether they are doing science or social studies. So it's like part of their writing.

Investigator: **The assumption in establishing standards and test-based accountability is that they motivate teachers and schools to improve student learning and focus on specific types of learning. Some observers have raised concerns that this translates to teaching to the test while others feel that it leads**

to effective teaching styles. The ASK4 has been administered for several years now. Think back and examine the way you taught when you first started teaching and the way you teach now.

Q08 Describe how you teach today and how it is similar or different than how you've taught in the past.

(To A) So this might be good one for you since you been around for 25 years.

You've been around before even the ESPAs. And even with the ESPAs, I know a lot of teachers did the ESPAs but it was different from the ASK in that the scores weren't published in the papers and things like that.

D: I don't remember them being stressed as much. This is only my second year of teaching, but I don't remember ever remember having this kind of stress.

C: Even the kids coming said they were nervous about it the first day of school.

A: Everything was more project-based and omm...hands-on and very omm... What would the word be?

C: Fun. More interesting. Remember what we said before? We could have fun now.

A: Omm...calm.

A: Yeah we looked at each other and said now we can do all the fun things we've been dying to do with our class.

Investigator: Like what? Can you give me an example?

B: Any kind of projects.

A: Projects.

E: It includes writing and all that but it's just more fun.

A: Who has time to sit and do omm..literature circles. When everyone has to know how to read a passage and answer questions.

C: Right.

A: So the literature circles were on the back burner, omm...projects, sharing your books with each other. There isn't as much time to do Science and Social Studies where as now you can get into it a little bit more.

C: More time in science labs...

A: Yeah.

C: ...or Social Studies, building a village or something like that.

A: You're just giving them time to figure out a math problem on a board just by trial and error with a group of kids.

C: Right.

A: Instead of rushing to show them the algorithm, because God forbid it might be on the test.

C: Yeah.

A: Instead it was like...let me give you a problem and see how you would figure it out. And let them take the time to use their pictures or do whatever they wanted do and say you know what that was really good, you had a good idea. Le me show you another way you can do it and introduce fractions. You can't do that. Instead you have to say, "Listen when you see this, do this. And when you see that, this is what you should do." It was just kind of pumping them into being little robots.

B: Yep. Robots.

D: And before here I was in a Montessori school so it's completely different. For two years it's just all hands-on and problem solving and to go from that to OK now we're gonna get ready, it's a whole different style of teaching. It really is.

C: We don't have time to just let it become part of them. It's this is how you do it and we're done.

B: Yeah.

E: It makes harder, especially for those kids that need that extra time.

A: Because you wonder how much they really internalize.

B: Once the summer hits, what happens?

A: You know, you put it into their heads in three weeks and spit it out and now it's gone.

E: If they're going to test the math it shouldn't cover the entire year. It should just be the first half of the year or something, where you can really do it on a normal pace.

C: When we do long division that takes a long time, and there's like one question on it.

B: I know.

C: It takes weeks and weeks to get it and it's one question. (Laughter)

Investigator: **Q09: Overall, how many hours per week do you spend teaching each subject area?**

So you were mentioning that once the test time comes around. Social Studies and Science are out the door. But... so in general, how much time would you say, from September to January are you spending with Reading, Language Arts? I don't know if you have blocks.

All: Yeah, we have block time.

Investigator: How much time? Is Reading/Language Arts one block?

All: Yeah.

Investigator: Is that an hour?

E: I'd make it an hour and a half.

Investigator: Five times a week?

C: Depends on what your schedule is. If you could squeeze it in more.

E: Depends what your time is. Right. I do an hour and a half. A minimum of an hour. Math is an hour.

Investigator: Five times a week?

All: Five times.

Investigator: And Social Studies and Science?

E: Every other day.

A: Yeah. Every other day.

Investigator: Or?

A: It's either one or the other.

Investigator: One or the other every other day.

E: Or sometimes like if it's a lab you just want to keep going, instead a double period, and then...

Investigator: Is that 50 minutes or half an hour?

All: 40 minutes.

Investigator: And then what happens once January rolls around and you're getting ready for the test? Are you spending more time in Reading/Language Arts?

All: Uh huh. Yes.

Investigator: How much more would you say? What would you say a day you're spending on Reading/Language Arts?

E: Two hours. Because we spend an hour...I can't do Math more than an hour. It's too boring for me.

Investigator: Do you switch for Math?

All: No.

Investigator: Just replacement?

All: Yeah.

C: Yeah, we have the block time so you're pretty much locked into that time.

Investigator: And Social Studies and Science?

A: Bye, bye.

Investigator: Bye, bye. And then they come back after the test I'm assuming? You kind of go back to the regular schedule?

All: Right.

D: In Social Studies or Science we put them on a project or something.

E: So you do get your project work in during the testing.

D: But it's shortened.

All: Yeah, right.

E: Because you have to have some fun aside doing, teaching the NJASK.

B: I know.

E: So that's what I do. I try to do some projects for Science and Social Studies during that time, so they are working with a partner. Cause it's too much...

B: As much as Language Arts and Math are hurting when you're doing that. You're just like draining them and at least you can throw them back some kind of fun.

Investigator: Sounds like prison.

B: It is. (Laughter)

A: So telling. (Laughter)

Q10: Has that amount of time always been the same or has that changed over time? So for those you have been in the district for a long time. Has it always been that you've been doing Reading/Language Arts block, Math block, Science and Social Studies?

C: It's definitely more time now.

Investigator: More time. Spending more time in which areas? Like more time in Reading?

A: Not our schedule time though. Our Language Arts period used to be an hour and a half without a doubt.

C: A couple of years ago.

A: And so was the Math. It was an hour and 20.

E: That's right.

Investigator: So why was it reduced?

C: It doesn't fit into the whole school schedule.

Investigator: So with specials and everything?

All: Yeah.

Investigator: So it was actually reduced.

A: I mean they didn't want to hire teachers, if they had to hire a half day... truly, a half day art teacher, a half day gym teacher. Instead they just cut the schedule down.

B: Hmm...it's not in the budget.

Investigator: And then I'm guessing before the ASK testing, you weren't throwing Science and Social Studies out the window.

A: Nooooo.

Investigator: To what extent has the ASK4 influenced your instruction? Do you feel like, those of you been doing this for a while, it has changed your instructional practices?

D: Absolutely.

A: Oh yeah.

C: You're more robotic.

B: Right.

C: This is it. This is the way it's done.

A: Come on guys. Get out your NJASK books. (Laughter) Let's go.

D: Last year I worked for a Catholic school. I'm a different teacher. You have to like rush through all this stuff and they don't look at it again. Especially in the writing...and picture prompts and poetry prompts. (Inaudible) They should be able to look at something and write. I mean...

A: You know it's funny. I was talking about getting mixed messages before. I could be sending them mixed messages. You know I'm telling them it's not a big deal and relax, and then I'm flinging a book at them and were spending an hour doing it. But what we try to do on our grade level is to make it sound like it's a game for the kids, like they think you don't know this ahh...we're going to show them how smart you are... and try to build up their confidence. Even if they're freaking out inside... with them.

E: We're building their confidence.

C: And a lot of people are doing the timed pieces, but then we're doing their other pieces where we are taking the time to revise and edit and publish.

(Many talking at once)

Investigator: So it sounds to me that you are doing a lot of fun things, a lot of projects and that's...

A: And I have to say in the last, I want to say 21 years the kids themselves come in more anxious than they did even, I want going to say ten years ago. Ten years ago, a nine-year-old or even an eight year old, I had third grade back then had... they were just a different persona than they are now. Now they are pressured to be successful lawyers at ten, and future doctors, and getting into college. They like are very aware of college and I just don't remember my eight year olds even in the 80's and 90's being even remotely interested. It was, I want to be the pitcher of my little league team. And so I feel very sad for the kids we have now. They are very stressed out.

D: I had this conversation in my class the other day. They couldn't even understand how somebody WOULDN'T go to college.

A: Yeah.

E: Yeah, it has to be coming from the parents.

All: Yeah.

E: And all these test scores.

Investigator: **In New Jersey the ASK4 is used as an assessment tool for the Core Curriculum Content Standards (CCCS). Some people have wondered if the ASK4 has had any impact on classroom assessment practices.** So before we were talking about instruction, now we are talking about assessment. This section addresses how you assess the students in your own classroom.

Q12: Suppose I was a student teacher assigned to your classroom. What types of assessment tools would I see being used in your classroom?

So you were mentioning that you do the writing prompts. So I'm guessing you probably use the rubric. Right?

All: Uh huh.

E: I don't like the rubric. It has too many things on it. We do our own.

A: Yeah we made our own. We made our own rubric. And I use different rubrics for different writing pieces.. omm...what else do we do for assessments? Don't think about the NJASK.

C: We do peers assessments, self-assessments.

A: We have a portfolio omm... written tests, open-ended questions.

Investigator: Now when you write up your tests will you model it after the ASK testing to get them familiar with the format?

A: No.

Investigator: Multiple choice or?

E: You do a combination of multiple choice and open-ended questions anyway, but not for the ASK. They get enough with their prep books. I think. I don't know.

Q13: Look back to when you started teaching. How have your assessment techniques changed? So do you think because of the ASK4 testing your assessment techniques have changed at all?

A: That's pretty funny. I started in 78, and everything was omm... multiple choice, fill in the blank, word bank, two essays at the end. It was very lockstep. And then omm...in the beginning of the 80s they really enforced centers. Even the older kids, and ours were at a Montessori school at the time, it was more portfolios, taped conversations with our students, let them pick a sample of their favorite work, explain why it's their favorite work and I would say omm...since the NJASK we're reverting back to omm...a little bit more of that multiple choice, fill in the blank, kind of thing.

At least for me, I don't spend as much time...I can't tell you the last time I taped recorded one of my kids.

A: It's really sad. Really sad.

Investigator: Anyone else?

(E walked back in the room asking what we were discussing.)

Investigator: We were talking about...I'm sorry...whether your assessment techniques have changed at all.

E: Oh, absolutely, yeah.

Investigator: In what ways?

E: More multiple choice, less essay, that kind of thing.

Investigator: **Q14: To what extent has the ASK4 influenced your assessment?**

So would you say it has influenced your assessment or would you say it hasn't really influenced you?

C: It's so different for me because this is my third year here and..

Investigator: So you really don't have...

C: Yeah, and in the Montessori schools there's none of this, it's two different things. It's apples to oranges. They don't even get graded report cards. It's so different. There's no NJASK testing. So there's a lot more observation, informal assessment and analysis and things.

A: Are they hiring? (Laughter)

Investigator: Anyone?

C: It's a hard question.

Investigator: Do you think it has influenced your assessment?

C: Well part of it, part of it is how I do the test but omm..more my teaching style, I think that my assessment style.

Many: I think instruction.

A: We make sure that they're practicing in that type of testing. So it's not unfamiliar or foreign to them, but that's not my only way to assess a child. There are a lot of other pieces to it.

Investigator: **The ASK4 was designed in alignment with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act to measure students' achievement in the Core Curriculum Content Standards (CCCS). This section addresses how the results from the test are used in your school district.**

Q15: How and when are the results of the ASK4 given to you? So when do you get the results? So you just took them in March, when will you get those results?

C: Well, we will beat their door down...

A: Yeah, usually in the middle of September, we'll ask, "Hey whatever happened with that NJASK? How did the kids do? Oh yes we got them back in August. Can I get a copy?"

C: And then we have to beg for a copy of this year's.

B: Yeah, the parents get them before us.

E: They get them in the summer, yeah.

Investigator: And do they...like what do they give you? Do they give you...

C: A print out.

A: Yeah, they give us their scores.

B: Boom, boom, boom.

E: And they are all listed of course from advanced proficient, all the way down.
They are all sorted.

B: And then you wonder why isn't this kid classified?

C: And then you wonder what you did wrong.

A: I don't think we get the same breakdown that the parents get though. The parents
get two different...

B: Yeah they get like the bar graphs and everything else.

E: They get a breakdown of how they do. Which particular skills they did well
on...

Investigator: And you don't get that?

E: No we pretty much get advanced proficient...

C: Some scores...

E: Yeah, but it's not a detailed report. It's highlighting areas. Like in the picture or poetry prompt it will say whatever they got four out of eight, but you don't know within it what they did wrong.

B: Yeah, exactly.

Investigator: And do you with have any meetings on this? Do you discuss the results?

A: Yes. And here's what they say, "Let's see omm...Jordan C., look at that, he scored a 248, two points away from becoming advanced proficient. What can you do for him to make him advanced this year? Highlight the children that you might be able to bump up, to advanced. Not that it matters.

C: And then the ones that are right below proficient, you're begging for them to give this kids extra help. You have to fight.

A: Her you don't help because she can't possibly bump up. You don't have to highlight her score. We're just going to ignore her for the year. She's going to stay proficient. Lot's of luck to you.

C: It's just those highlighted ones.

Investigator: Now what do they have you doing with the highlighted ones to bump them up?

C: Similes and metaphors.

A: Yes. We are just making sure that those children get special attention from us...

Investigator: In class..

A: ...to bump them up and so we will sit with Jordan and we will say, Jordan I'd like to explain Onomatopoeia to you. You can use that in your writing. (Laughter)

C: We're kidding, but it's serious.

A: I guess we are making light of it because we are very sad.

Investigator: Do they make you do bar graphs or circle graphs to analyze anything?

All: No.

Investigator: They don't do any of that. It's just highlight the kids that can be bumped up and...

C: Yeah, but the thing is with those reports, picture prompt it's a four out of eight. I don't know... I don't know what happened in the picture prompt that went wrong.

A: They give you no information. And I want to know who the people are that mark the writing. Are they subjective people? Because you get so many, you know, little things...

(Interrupted by several people coming into the classroom.)

Investigator: **Q16: How is the data from the ASK4 used in your district?** Do they use it to evaluate staff, place kids, what do they do with it?

A: Yeah some of it is who gets into the TAG program.

Investigator: What's that?

A: Gifted and Talented.

B: Talented and gifted.

A: Talented and gifted. The names changed I don't know how many times. TAG, IDEAs.

Investigator: Basic skills I'm assuming too?

A: Only for some. Depending on your score.

Investigator: If they fall below a certain level do they get in?

C: Under proficient, then yes.

A: Not necessarily.

E: If they have a 504 and they are not proficient they are in it. But I have a student that's not proficient and she's not in it. I've been trying all year to get her in it but it's still not happening.

Investigator: Why?

C: That's a whole other story.

A: Oh no. She wants to know why? The room is not big enough. (Laughter)

Investigator: Oh so there is no room for them.

Investigator: Do they use it to evaluate you at all? The scores?

D: I guess I'll see next year.

B: No.

(Many speaking at once. Inaudible)

E: Just that bubble year was a real...

B: Yeah.

Investigator: How about to evaluate curriculum. Do they use it to evaluate curriculum at all?

C: Well they did with math because that one grade level did bad, didn't they? No?

B: No. Our curriculum is pretty much straight on.

A: Not because of the NJASK it had to do with the five-year evaluation.

Investigator: **For this next section I'm just going to ask you few demographic questions and then we are finished.**

Q17 How many years have you been teaching?

Investigator: A

A: 29

Investigator: B

B: 10

Investigator: C

C: 5

Investigator: D

D: Almost 2.

Investigator: E

E: 21.

Investigator: **Q18: How many years have you been teaching fourth grade?**

Investigator: A

A: 13

Investigator: B

B: 7

Investigator: C

C: 3

Investigator: D

D: Almost 1.

Investigator: E

E: 20.

Investigator: **Q19: What is your age range by sure hands. If you prefer not to answer do not raise your hand.**

20 to 30? B

31 to 40? D

41 to 50? E, C.

Over 50? A.

Q20: Is there anything they care to add that would provide me with any additional insight into your views of the ASK4 testing?

I'm kind of gathering that you just love it? (Laughter)

D: I just want to say, get rid of it.

C: Isn't this all going to change when President Bush leaves office anyway?

A: No. I think philosophically, accountability is an important issue. Omm... I as a parent would like to know if my kids are being educated so there has to be some kind of check and balance and I get all that. I do get all that. I just wish that when they omm...ask us to fill out a survey on what we want to see changed in the test ...we've been saying the same thing every single year and every year the test time, the parameters are still the same, it's still March. And it just makes you feel like

omm...why did you bother asking me what I thought about it, if you're not going, if we're not going to have any impact on it.

E: Yeah, I think the test should be later in the year, May or June. Well probably May, I guess... and it should not be published in the paper. Because I think that's too stressful. It puts too much pressure omm...just on everybody and it trickles down and affects everybody, even the kids. I mean they can find out what they need to find out without publishing the scores in the paper. I mean the state knows how the school districts are doing. They don't need to make that public. It would be less of an issue for the parents and everybody else and for us. So...

Investigator: Thank you very much. **As you leave I will give you an envelope to send me any personal message or statement that you may want to add. Thank you for your participation today.**

End of tape.

APPENDIX C

Superintendent Letter

BARBARA A. PEPE
GEORGE WASHINGTON SCHOOL
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March 1, 2007

Dear Superintendent,

I am a doctoral student at Seton Hall University enrolled in the Ed.D program in educational leadership, management and policy. I have been teaching elementary students for the past sixteen years at the George Washington School in Wyckoff, New Jersey.

I would like to conduct a focus group interview with fourth grade teachers from your school district. The interview would last approximately one hour. The date and time of the focus group interview would be scheduled so as not to interfere with other meetings or functions in the district. I would also like to use a room at one of your elementary schools for the focus group interview that is comfortable and familiar to the participants.

My dissertation topic is: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF FOURTH GRADE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACT OF THE NEW JERSEY ASK 4 TESTING ON INSTRUCTIONAL AND ASSESSMENT PRACTICES. The purpose of this study is to analyze how using a high stakes test, like the New Jersey ASK4, may affect the instructional and assessment practices of fourth grade teachers. This is an explanatory research project that will use qualitative data from three focus groups in the analysis.

Teachers will meet at a set time and destination to engage in a discussion that will revolve around a predetermined question route. The responses will be tape recorded using two voice activated tape recorders. The tape recording devices are being used so comments, ideas, and opinions that are discussed can be used later for analysis. The researcher will also take notes during the discussion. Participants will have a lettered tent card in front of them, which will serve as their identity during the group discussions. No names will be used during the discussion or in the transcripts. The data will be analyzed in the dissertation without reference to the participants or the school district.

A letter requesting permission to conduct the research will be sent to the principals of all the elementary schools. In addition, letters of recruitment and an informed consent form will be mailed to the fourth grade teachers asking them to volunteer for the study. Subjects may refuse to participate or to discontinue participation at any time with no penalty or loss of benefits to which they would otherwise be entitled to.

The responses of the participants will be tape recorded, for which they will sign an informed consent form. The tape recordings will be transcribed into written format. Participants will be informed that full confidentiality will be utilized. No names will be used during the discussion or in the transcripts. The data will be analyzed in the dissertation without reference to the participants or the school district.

The tape recordings will remain in the possession of the researcher after they have been transcribed. The tape recordings and the written transcriptions stored on a USB memory key will remain in the possession of the researcher in a locked safe and will be destroyed after three years. No one other than the researcher will have access to the data.

I would appreciate an opportunity to further discuss my study and respond to any questions or concerns you may have. I would also appreciate a letter granting permission to do the research in your district. The letter must be on your district's letterhead for the purposes of verification. I will remove the district name as well as your name to ensure confidentiality. Thank you for your assistance. I look forward to meeting with you.

Sincerely,

Barbara A. Pepe

APPENDIX D

Principal Letter

BARBARA A. PEPE
GEORGE WASHINGTON SCHOOL
 270 Woodland Avenue
 Wyckoff, NJ 07481
 bepepe@wyckoffschoools.org
 201-848-5740

March 1, 2007

Dear Principal,

I am a doctoral student at Seton Hall University enrolled in the Ed.D program in educational leadership, management and policy. I have been teaching elementary students for the past sixteen years at the George Washington School in Wyckoff, New Jersey. I have just received written approval from your superintendent to conduct research for my dissertation in your school district.

My dissertation topic is: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF FOURTH GRADE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACT OF THE NEW JERSEY ASK 4 TESTING ON INSTRUCTIONAL AND ASSESSMENT PRACTICES. The purpose of this study is to analyze how using a high stakes test, like the New Jersey ASK4, may affect the instructional and assessment practices of fourth grade teachers. This is an explanatory research project that will use qualitative data from three focus groups in the analysis.

I would like to conduct the focus group interview in your school with all of the fourth grade teachers. The interview will last approximately one hour. The date and time of the focus group interview will be scheduled so as not to interfere with other meetings or functions at the school. I would also like to use a room at your elementary school to conduct the focus group interview that is comfortable and familiar to the participants.

I will meet teachers at a set time and destination to engage in a discussion that will revolve around a predetermined question route. The responses will be tape recorded using two voice activated tape recorders. The tape recording devices are being used so comments, ideas, and opinions that are discussed can be used later for analysis. I will also take notes during the discussion. Participants will have a lettered tent card in front of them, which will serve as their identity during the group discussions. No names will be used during the discussion or in the transcripts. The data will be analyzed in the dissertation without reference to the participants or the school district.

A letter of recruitment will be mailed to the fourth grade teachers asking them to volunteer for the study. Subjects may refuse to participate or to discontinue participation at any time with no penalty or loss of benefits to which they would otherwise be entitled to.

Participants will be asked to sign an informed consent form to participate in the study and will be informed that the discussion will be tape recorded. The tape recordings will be transcribed into written format. Participants will be informed that full confidentiality will be utilized. No names will be used during the discussion or in the transcripts. The data will be analyzed in the dissertation without reference to the participants or the school district.

The tape recordings will remain in the possession of the researcher after they have been transcribed. The tape recordings and the written transcriptions stored on a USB memory key will remain in the possession of the researcher in a locked safe and will be destroyed after three years. No one other than the researcher will have access to the data.

I would appreciate an opportunity to further discuss my study and respond to any questions or concerns you may have. Thank you for your assistance. I look forward to meeting with you.

Sincerely,

Barbara A. Pepe

APPENDIX E

Letter of Intent and Solicitation

BARBARA A. PEPE
GEORGE WASHINGTON SCHOOL
270 Woodland Avenue
Wyckoff, NJ 07481
bepepe@wyckoffschools.org
201-848-5740

March 1, 2007

Dear Fourth Grade Teacher,

I am a doctoral student at Seton Hall University enrolled in the Ed.D program in educational leadership, management and policy. I have been teaching elementary students for the past sixteen years at the George Washington School in Wyckoff, New Jersey.

I have just received written approval from your superintendent and building principal to conduct research for my dissertation in your school district. I would like to request your involvement in participating in a focus group interview with other fourth grade teachers for this research.

My dissertation topic is: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF FOURTH GRADE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACT OF THE NEW JERSEY ASK 4 TESTING ON INSTRUCTIONAL AND ASSESSMENT PRACTICES. The purpose of this study is to analyze how using a high stakes test, like the New Jersey ASK4, may affect the instructional and assessment practices of fourth grade teachers. This is an explanatory research project that will use qualitative data from three focus groups in the analysis.

I will be conducting a focus group discussion after school at a date and time that does not interfere with other meetings or functions. The interview will last approximately one hour and refreshments will be served for your enjoyment. I have asked permission to use a room at one of the elementary schools which is comfortable and familiar to you.

I am conducting a qualitative study that will utilize data from discussions in the analysis. The interview will be conducted using a predetermined question route, which I have attached for your review. The responses will be tape recorded using two voice activated tape recorders. The tape recording devices are being used so comments, ideas, and opinions that are discussed can be used later for analysis. I will also take notes during the discussion. Upon completion of our discussion, you will be given a self-addressed stamped envelope in case you would like to add something to the discussion. If you cannot attend the focus group interview, you have the option of responding to the questions in written format.

Full confidentiality will be utilized. Participants will have a lettered tent card in front of them, which will serve as their identity during the group discussions. No names will be used during the discussion or in the transcripts. The data will be analyzed in the dissertation without reference to the participants or the school district.

The tape recordings will be transcribed into written format for the analysis. The tape recordings and the written transcriptions stored on a USB memory key will remain in the possession of the researcher in a locked safe and will be destroyed after three years. No one other than the researcher will have access to the data.

I have attached an Informed Consent Form for your review. This form outlines the procedures and your rights in participating in this study. By signing this form you are granting permission to be a participant in this study and allowing for your responses to be tape recorded.

Participation in this study is on a volunteer basis. You may refuse to participate or to discontinue participation at any time with no penalty. Participation comes with no associated risks and no benefits, monetary or otherwise. The potential benefit in participating in this study is that you will add to the existing knowledge base we have on state mandated testing.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Seton Hall University Review Board for Human Subject Research. The IRB believes that the research procedures adequately safeguard the subject's privacy, welfare, civil liberties, and rights. The Chairperson of the IRB, Mary F. Ruzicka, Ph.D, can be reached at (973) 313-6314.

Thank you for your assistance in this research project. If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign the Informed Consent Form and mail it in the self addressed stamped envelope that is provided.

Sincerely,

Barbara A. Pepe

APPENDIX F
Informed Consent



Informed Consent Form

1. Researcher's Affiliation:

Barbara Pepe is a doctoral student at Seton Hall University enrolled in the Ed.D. program in educational leadership, management and policy. She is currently employed as a teacher at the George Washington School in Wyckoff, New Jersey where she has worked for the past sixteen years.

2. Purpose of the Study:

The title of the study is: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF FOURTH GRADE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACT OF THE NEW JERSEY ASK4 TESTING ON INSTRUCTIONAL AND ASSESSMENT PRACTICES. The purpose of this study is to conduct an in-depth analysis of fourth grade teachers' perceptions of the impact of the NJ ASK4 testing on their instructional and assessment practices. This is an explanatory research project that will use qualitative data from focus group interviews in the analysis. The focus group discussion will be conducted after school at a date and time that will not interfere with other meetings or functions. The group discussion will take approximately one hour to complete and will meet in a convenient location in the school district. Refreshments will be provided for participants' convenience.

3. Procedures:

Teachers will meet at a set time and destination to engage in a discussion that will revolve around a predetermined question route. The responses will be tape recorded using two Radio Shack CTR-122 voice activated tape recorders. The tape recording devices are being used so comments, ideas, and opinions that are discussed can be used later for analysis. The researcher will also take notes during the discussion. Participants will have a lettered tent card in front of them which will serve as their identity during the group discussions. No names will be used during the discussion or in the transcripts. The data will be analyzed in the dissertation without reference to the participants or the school district.

4. Survey Instruments:

Data will be collected from participants by having them respond to questions from a predetermined question route. The questions are geared to solicit teachers' perceptions of the NJ ASK4 testing in terms of test preparation and administration, external influences, content and mode of instruction, use and reporting of test results, and assessment strategies used in the classroom. The questions are mostly open-ended to promote conversation among participants.

Seton Hall University
Institutional Review Board

MAR 27 2007

Approval Date

College of Education and Human Services
Department of Education Leadership, Management and Policy
Tel. 973.761.9397
400 South Orange Avenue • South Orange, New Jersey 07079-2685

Expiration Date

MAR 27 2008



5. Voluntary Nature of the Project:

By signing the Informed Consent Form and attending the focus group discussion, you are consenting to participate in the study and are fully aware that your responses will be tape recorded and transcribed into written format. Refusal to participate or discontinue participation at any time will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you would otherwise be entitled to.

6. Anonymity/Confidentiality:

Responses will be kept completely confidential. Names or any other identifiable means will not be included on any forms or transcripts. Only the researcher will have access to the data. Findings from the analysis will be made without personal or district reference in the dissertation.

7. Security of Stored Data:

The tape recordings will remain in the possession of the researcher after they have been transcribed. The tape recordings and the transcribed data stored on a USB memory key will remain in a locked safe and will be destroyed after three years. No one other than the researcher will have access to the data.

8. Confidentiality of Records:

All responses and information will be kept completely confidential. No one will have access to the list of subjects used for this research. Participants will have an assigned lettered tent card in order to maintain confidentiality. Teachers' names and district names will not be used during the taped discussion or in the analysis in order to protect the subjects' identities. Only the researcher will have access to this data. The analysis of the data will be included in the researcher's dissertation.

9. Risks:

There are no risks in this research.

10. Benefits:

There are no direct benefits that participants will receive by participating in this study. The potential benefit is that participation in the research will add to the existing knowledge base on state mandated testing. The participants will receive refreshments during the focus group interview for their enjoyment.

11. Remuneration:

There are no monetary benefits or remuneration of any kind by participating in this study.

Seton Hall University
Institutional Review Board

MAR 27 2007

Approval Date

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Tel. 973.761.9397
400 South Orange Avenue • South Orange, New Jersey 07079-2685

Expiration Date

MAR 27 2008

**12. Compensation for Minimal Risk:**

There is no risk associated with this research therefore no compensation is required.

13. Alternatives to Research Study:

If any participant is unavailable to attend the focus group discussion, they will have the opportunity to respond to the questions in written format. The participant will be given a self-addressed stamped envelope to return responses. Confidentiality will be respected.

14. Contact Information:

The researcher may be contacted for further information, answers to pertinent questions, or for information about research subject's rights by contacting the researcher at the following: Barbara A. Pepe, George Washington School, 270 Woodland Avenue, Wyckoff, NJ 07481 (201)-848-5740.

Faculty Advisor: Anthony J. Colella, Ph.D., Seton Hall University, 400 South Orange Avenue, South Orange, NJ 07079 (973) 761-9397.

International Review Board (IRB): Mary F. Ruzicka, Ph.D, Seton Hall University, 400 South Orange Avenue, NJ 07079 (973) 313-6314.

15. Permission to use Audio Tape Recorder:

Audio tape recording equipment will be utilized to record the discussion for analysis so as not to miss pertinent information. Participants have the right to review any portion of the taped recordings and request that it be destroyed. The researcher will have the taped recordings transcribed into written format for analysis. Participants' names will not be used. Instead, randomly assigned letters will be utilized for identification purposes to ensure confidentiality. The taped and written recordings will only be accessible by the researcher. The data from the taped recordings and the written transcripts stored on a USB memory key will be secured in a locked safe. The data will be included in the dissertation without personal or district reference. All data will be destroyed after three years.

16. Acknowledgement of Informed Consent Forms:

I have read the material above and agree to participate in the study. I am aware that I will be given a copy of the signed and dated Informed Consent Form for my files.

Printed Name

Date

Signature

Seton Hall University
Institutional Review Board

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